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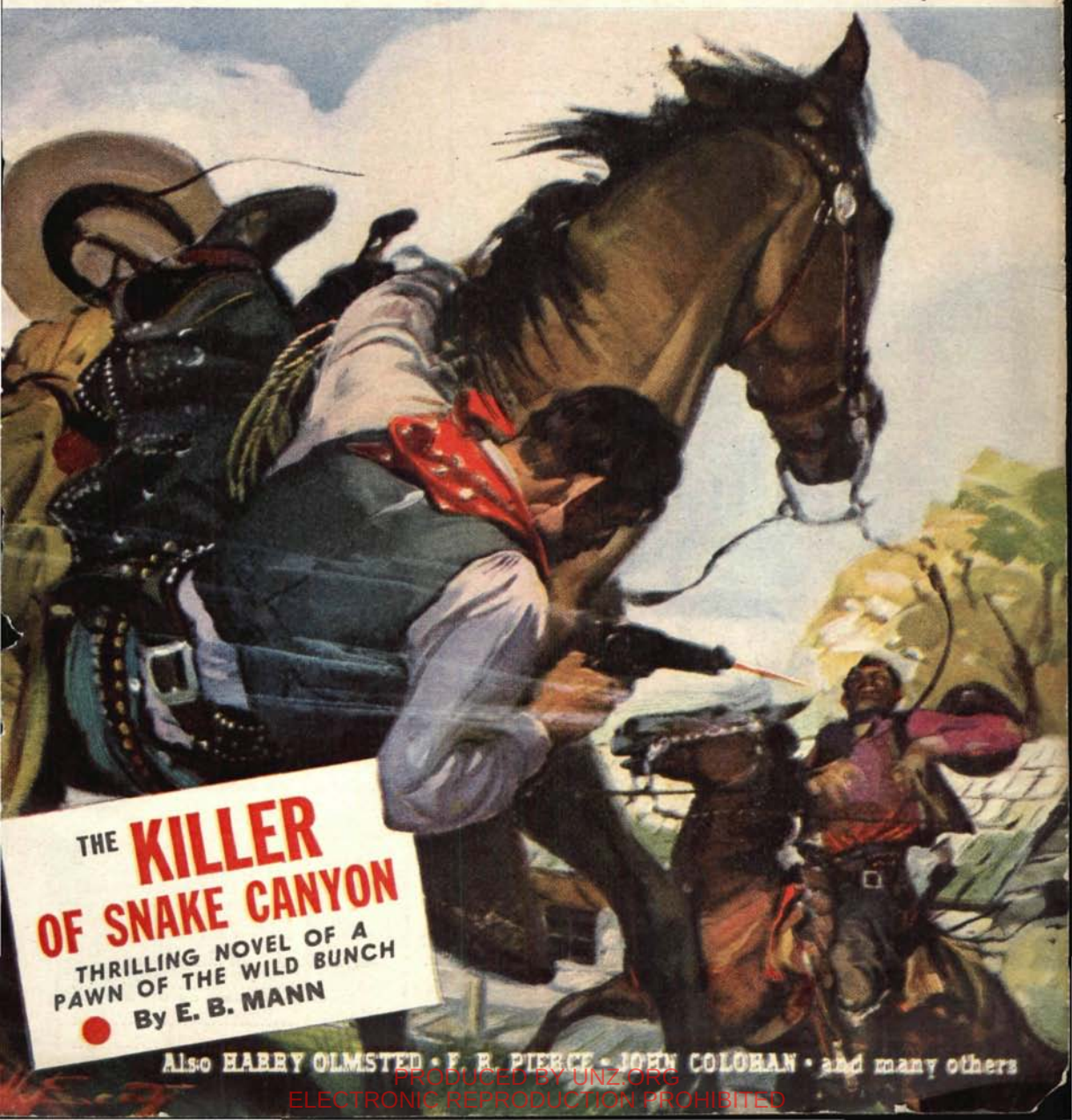

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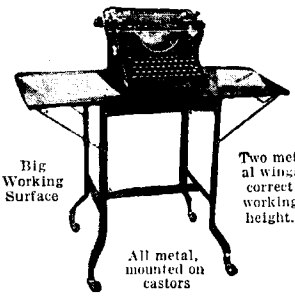

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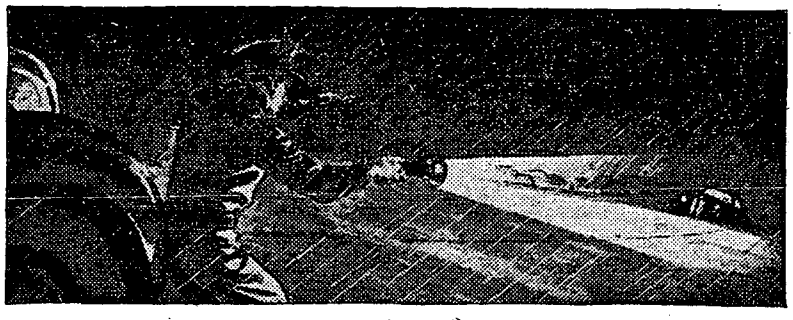

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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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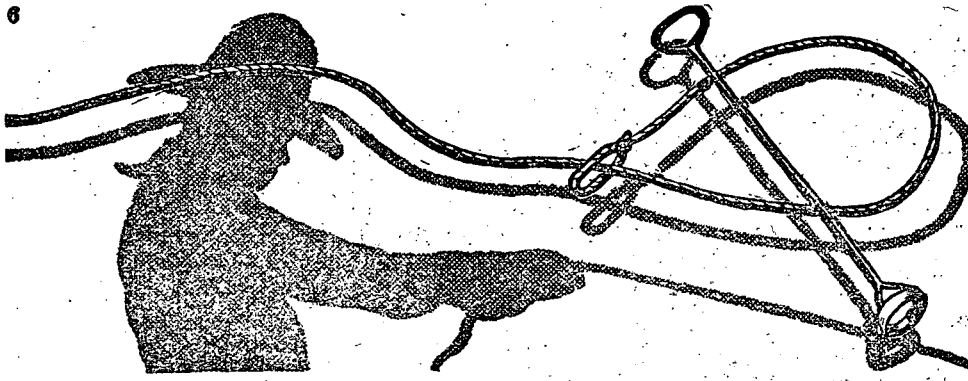

The Roundup

"Don't you think you are overdoing the Mexican stories right now?" writes Mr. W. W. Suderly, of Port Jervis, N. Y. "You publish a Western magazine, and lately you have printed a host of Chinese, treasure and Mexican stories. We are all quite tired of this kind of stuff we get in short stories. We who buy Western Story want Westerns, and not animal or California Chinese stories.

"I have bought your magazine since the first issue, and that is near a lifetime. When Western Story was fifteen cents a week it was a good magazine. Now you have too many old characters and too many repeats. Hep Gallegher stories are all repeats, as was Shorty and the Sheriff. Please cut the down-at-the-heel Mex Don stuff out and give us some real old Western stories. I am not alone in this request. We are also tired of salmon-fishing murder stories, too many animal and old-character yarns. I could not finish GRINGO CABALLERO. I hope I have not said too much after buying around fifteen hundred copies of Western Story."

Anyone who has bought fifteen hundred copies of Western Story certainly has the right to have his say, Mr. Suderly, and the subject of your letter is of such interest to us we would like to have other reactions to it. For the sake of variety, it has been our policy to publish stories relating to all phases of the West. Many readers like animal stories; many others feel that an occasional repeat character is as pleasant as meeting up with an old friend. Naturally, we try to please as many readers as possible in every issue. We wonder if any of our other readers are of the same mind as Mr. Suderly? Here's your chance for a parley. Why not "come augerin'" and let us know how you feel concerning these "off-the-trail" stories?

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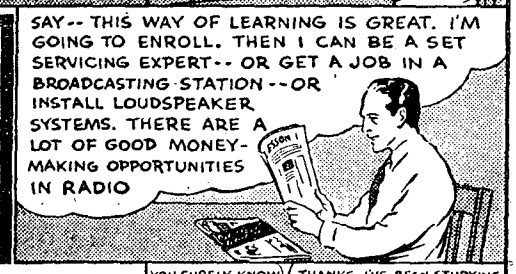

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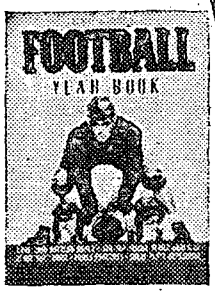

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THE KILLER OF Snake Canyon

BY E. B. MANN

CHAPTER I

HANDCUFFS FOR THE NEUCES KID

THE moment he felt the pressure of Cass Linden's gun against his spine and saw the reflection of the man's dour face in the cracked mirror on the wall of the depot washroom, the Neuces Kid knew that this was the end of the Neuces Kid, Outlaw. And he was glad!

"O. K., Cass," he grunted. "No argument." He wiped the soap out of his other eye and added: "Only ease up on that gun, will you? It hurts!"

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Linden spoke sourly. "It ain't hurtin' you no more than the corns and callouses I've got from chasin' you hurt me, durn you! And all for a measly five-hundred-dollar bounty! You ain't no great shakes as an outlaw, Kid, but you're a traveler! Ain't you never heard a rollin' stone gathers no moss?"

He lifted the Kid's guns from their holsters and stepped back, letting a small sigh of relief escape him. "Five years!" he said. "Five years o' my time, and a permanent crease in my skull where you laid a gun barrel against it—not to mention the corns and callouses! Kid, you ain't worth it!"

The Kid ran a comb through his tawny mop and turned slowly, letting his hands drop to the empty holsters. The loss of those guns left him with an odd feeling of nakedness. It left him, too, a sense of lightness not entirely accounted for by the weight of the guns. Relief from them meant relief also from a far weightier burden: the burden of outlawry. It was a burden that had galled him, that had etched his face and soul with bitterness. Relieved of it, even the certainty of prison years was bearable.

He said slowly: "I've wondered about that some. There's plenty other men with bigger prices on their heads than I've got. How come you picked on me to foller, Cass?"

"I'm Scotch," Linden told him dryly. "And stubborn. Once I've got a dollar in my pocket it hurts me to lose it. I had you all written down on the credit side of my ledger once, but you got away. That made you a loss on my books, so I had to catch you again. Oh, I ain't concentrated on you to the extent of passin' up other opportunities to earn a dollar, but I've kept you in mind, all right. Besides, there was that crack on the head you gave me."

The Kid grinned. "You ain't holdin' that against me, are you? I might've shot you! Fact is, shootin' you would've been easier, and safer! There've been times since when I've wished I hadn't been so gentle with you! You've been a nuisance, Cass. I ain't been able to sleep nights for wonderin' how close you was behind me."

IT was surprising, Cass Linden thought, what a change that grin made in the young outlaw's appearance. The Neuces Kid had been sixteen or thereabouts when he killed Bill Saxon. That was some eight years ago. Eight years of outlawry had put their mark on him, the mark of wolfish watchfulness, of bleak distrust, of bitterness. He was a man now, full grown, hard—and dangerous. But when he smiled, Linden thought, he didn't look a day older than he did the first time they met. And he seemed as friendly as a wagtail pup.

"It's a thing I've got to thank you for, I reckon—that gentleness," Linden said slowly. "It would've been easier, as you say, to shoot me. And safer. But we're even, maybe. There've been times since when *I* could've shot *you*, and didn't. On the other hand, it was some humiliatin' to be bashed on the head like a blind ox, as if I wasn't worth the waste of a bullet! I've held it against you, lad, even though I was grateful."

Mixed emotions caused a mixture also in Linden's speech. It was a speech highly colored with the idiom and inflection of this Western country in which he had lived so long; but there were times, as now, when it slipped back across those later years

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to pick up again the bur of the Highlands.

"I've wondered often why you *didn't* shoot me," Linden continued slowly. "You knew I'd foller you. You knew that once I'd took up your trail I'd stick till I got you. It's a reputation I've taken pains to build. Why didn't you shoot me?"

The Kid's smile faded. "I'm not a killer, Cass. Studyin' me the way you've done for so long, you ought to know that. Or don't you? Maybe you think—"

"I think for a man that ain't a killer you've done a right smart job o' killin'," Linden observed dryly. "Or else you've drawed wages as a gunhand under false pretenses! Leastways, you did kill Bill Saxon—"

"Sure! You're doggone right I killed him! He killed my father. You know that. I hunted him down, and I killed him. But I gave him an even break. You know *that*, too! The only reason killin' him made me an outlaw was, the sheriff o' that county was his brother!"

"It ain't my job," Linden said slowly, "to judge the rights and wrongs o' things like that. I'm kind o' like a bloodhound. I got a knack for huntin' men. Once the law puts a price on a man, I hunt him. I'm a bounty hunter, same as them that hunts four-legged varmints for the bounty. I make a right good livin' at it. If the law makes a mistake now and then, like maybe in your case—well, it ain't *my* fault, is it? Most of the men I catch *are* varmints! A coyote'd be a gentleman alongside most of 'em!"

Linden snorted. Plenty of people, through the years, had criticized this strange calling of his, and it was a sore subject. "Take yourself, now. You was a puncher before you killed Saxon. What've you been since? A gunhand, hirin' your guns to whoever wanted 'em. And you was with Haslam—"

"Sure!" The Kid's voice crackled now with a sudden anger. "Sure, and why? Because I couldn't do different! Because you and the lawmen wouldn't let me do different! I killed Saxon, and the law made me an outlaw. Six times I had jobs—honest jobs, punchin' cattle. And six times folks found out I was wanted and turned on me, tryin' to collect the bounty! The only jobs I could hold were the bad ones—places where a fast gun answered all questions. Sure, I've been a gunhand! I had to eat!"

His voice changed then. "I've had to do some shootin', the jobs I've held. But I've never killed a man, Cass, that wasn't an outlaw, same as me, holdin' the same kind of a job I was holdin' and hell-bent on killin' me if I didn't get him first. I was with Flash Haslam, yeah. There was a time when it was join Haslam or do a hemp-rope tango. I happened to bump into Haslam and he hid me. I rode with him for a while—on two or three jobs. But I never took a cent out o' them jobs, and I never pulled a trigger against a lawman or a law-abidin' man. You can believe that or not, but it's the truth! Haslam liked me, too. He'd have made me his right-hand man if I'd stuck with him."

"I believe you, Kid," Linden said. "I've kept close track o' you, and I don't know nothin' to contradict what you've told me. Fact remains, though—you're wanted. And you ain't talkin' me out o' takin' you in, either."

The Kid chuckled. "I'm not tryin' to talk you out of it, Cass. I know I couldn't, in the first place. Anyway, I'm sort o' glad! The worst they can give me, I reckon,

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is a few years for manslaughter. Once I've served it, I'll be free. Which way you takin' me?"

"North, I reckon. Stage to Bandera, then east by rail."

"That's what I figured." The Kid's eyes were suddenly troubled. "Only—" He grinned a little, and this time his expression was oddly sheepish. "You see, Cass, I was sort of headin' for Bandera, my own self. There was . . . . well, there was a girl on the train. She got off here to take the stage north, so I . . . . I got off, too. Her old man owns a spread up there. I figgered maybe I could get me a job. It's a long ways from Texas, you know."

Linden grunted. "And you figger, in a new country you could get by without anybody knowin' you. You're figgerin' you could even come back up here, after you've served your time, maybe. Say, you and that girl must've made good time if she's a train acquaintance and you think she'd wait for you! What you're tryin' to say, I reckon, is that you don't want her to see you as my prisoner."

"That's it," the Kid said eagerly. "Look, Cass. Unload my guns and give 'em back to me. That way, she won't suspect; and you'll still have the edge on me. I'll give you my word, if you want it."

LOOKING out of the stage window as they rolled northward through the Wyoming country, Cass Linden wondered why he had done it. He must, he thought, be getting soft!

Still, the Kid wasn't a bad sort, maybe. There was a lot in what he had said about the law making him an outlaw. It had happened that way before, would happen again. It all depended, of course, on what outlawry had done to him. If it had soured him—if his association with outlaws, men like Flash Haslam, had turned him vicious and ugly—then he was ruined. If not, and if he served his time and cleared the slate behind him, then there might be hope for him.

The girl might help. She was pretty, sure; but, more than that, she sounded as if she had a level head on her shoulders. A girl like that might do a lot for a man. Her name was Beth; Elizabeth Afton. Her father, she said, had a place near Bandera; a small place, Linden gathered, centering on two or three sections of land he had bought from nesters. Beth had been away to school, and was just coming home.

She called the Kid Johnny. Linden had almost queered things over that name business. He had almost forgotten that the Kid's real name was Johnny. Johnny Hardin. For five years now Linden had thought of him only as Neuces, or the Neuces Kid, or just the Kid. Hearing him called Johnny, the way the girl did it, made the Kid sound like a different person.

A small spread, centering on land bought from a nester. Linden frowned a little. He knew Bandera; knew the country around it. It was R J country, mostly; R J and Hashknife. R J was old man Wright's outfit—Dan Wright, more generally known as Damn Wright because of his truculent habit of speech: "Damn right I'm right! That's me—Wright! Wright by name, right by nature!" Wright was a cowman of the old school; a believer in open range, hater of barbed wire and plowmen. The girl's father might not be a plowman, but he was on nester land. If that land happened to be of any importance to Wright, or to any of the big outfits, his future might not be so rosy!

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The crack of a rifle smashed that reverie and Linden jumped, startled. That jump loosened his seat on the cushions, and the lurch of the coach threw him left against the side of the coach and down, between the seats. He heard the girl scream above him; heard the shrill screech of the brake shoes as they clamped down on the coach's wheels. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the Kid's hands whip to his gun butts.

Linden grinned thinly, remembering that those guns were empty. The Kid couldn't do much, either to prevent the holdup or to make use of it as a chance to escape!

Linden's own gun came free of the leather as he clambered back onto the seat, but he held it covered. The coach had stopped now, tipped badly, slanting across the roadway. The driver had swung the team left against a rocky bank. That bank was high enough so that Linden could not see the top of it through the far window. But he could see the road on his own side of the coach —and what he saw pleased him.

CHAPTER II

HOLDUP

A MASKED man sat easily astride a fine prick-eared black stallion yonder, a rifle held loosely across the saddle. Nearer the coach window, a second man—this one on foot—held a pair of hip guns canted upward, covering the driver and the shotgun guard. A man's hand hung down into the rim of Linden's vision, and the fingers of that hand were bloody. That first shot, then, had been more than a mere warning. It had hit the guard! And the man on the black horse had done the shooting. Linden's first glance showed him that the rifle was still smoking.

It was the man on the black horse who held Linden's attention. A man on a black stallion. This might, he thought, turn out to be a luckier day even than he had thought! First the Kid—now this. For there was a man on Linden's list worth ten of the Kid; five thousand dollars against the Kid's five hundred! That man had a known preference for black horses, and a preference for stallions. He had had a black stallion in Texas, another in Arizona.

He had a preference, too, for flashy gear—and this man's bridle was silver-studded, his spurs silver, the guns in his hip holsters gripped with ivory. He wore a black poncho over his upper body, but his hat was visible—and it was a hat worth fifty dollars, unless Cass Linden's Scottish eyes deceived him.

Linden shot a quick glance at his fellow passengers. The girl was pale and her eyes were rounded, but she was silent; no foolishness about her. The Kid's hands were up now, but he was looking at Linden. There was some message in that look, but Linden had no time now to read it. His first thought was that the Kid was eying him in the hope that the holdup would give him a chance to escape. "So I'll get clear o' the coach first, out o' his reach," Linden thought cagily. "I can down them two gents yonder in a split second—and have the Kid covered before he can load."

He reached out with his left hand and opened the door, the gun in his right hand hidden by his body. He heard the Kid say: "No! No, Cass!" But the man on the ground nearest the coach was turning now, and there was no time to listen. Linden turned awkwardly, getting out of the coach backward, like an old man, frightened and blundering. That way, he could keep the gun hidden

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until he was ready.

He heard the girl gasp, and started to lift his head to see what had scared her. A gun slammed down across his hat brim, the front sight laying his scalp open above the temple. He felt the jolt of it, felt his whole body go limp and heavy, felt himself falling backward. He heard the Kid say smoothly: "Don't shoot, boys. This gent had ideas about bein' a hero, but I've fixed him. He won't make you no more trouble. And me—my guns ain't loaded."

Linden's thoughts raced, so that everything else seemed to move with a peculiar slowness. He thought: "Damn you, Kid! I trusted you!" And that was the last thought that registered in his mind. Blackness came up around him; blackness and pain. They swallowed him, sucking him down and down into bottomless depths—

HOLD it!" The man on the black horse yelled that sharply, and the order stopped four fingers on four ready triggers. Johnny Hardin knew that and was grateful! He sat back against the cushions, letting the sudden tension drain out of his nerves and muscles. He felt the girl beside him draw away from him.

But he had no time to think of that now. The man on the black horse had swerved back beside the coach windows and halted there, and his voice came in to them, crisp and venomous. "Set still, you—till I tell you different. Keep your hands where I can see 'em!"

Johnny grinned thinly. The man on the black knew his business. One thing at a time was his motto! First make sure of the guard and the driver, then take care of the passengers. High in the saddle as he was, the top of the coach hid Johnny's face from his as yet, but that made no difference. He could see Johnny's hands—and they were what counted.

"He'll be some surprised when he does see me," Johnny thought grimly. For he knew that voice; knew the man behind it. Had known him from the second of his first glimpse of him, just before Cass Linden went into action.

"Why did you do it?"

The girl's voice, low and bitterly accusing, jerked Johnny back out of his reverie. He looked at her and the grin faded slowly off his face as he thought how what was coming would hit her.

He said softly: "There's four men with rifles on top of that bank yonder. Cass figgered to gamble a pair o' quick shots against the two men here by the coach. He hadn't seen the four others. A pair don't stand up against four of a kind, lady. When Cass unlimbered, them four would've riddled this coach—you and Cass and me included! There wasn't time to tell him that. All I could think of to do was hit him."

He saw the girl glance out and up; saw the change in her eyes when they came back to him. She had seen the men he had mentioned, and sight of them had changed her opinion of him a little; put a doubt in her mind, at least. But it made no difference. Any minute now she would find out the real truth about him.

He heard the Wells Fargo box hit the dirt alongside the coach. Men were sliding down the bank now, joining the two in the road, and one of them bent to lift the box. The job was moving swiftly. The black horse sidled back a little, putting more distance between him and the coach before the man on him said crisply: "All right, you folks inside

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—come out. Careful with them hands, mister!"

JOHNNY leaned forward and stepped down. This was no time for manners! If he let the girl precede him somebody out there might think he was using her as a shield to cover a gunplay.

He lifted his head then and faced the masked man on the black stallion. He was grinning, but there was not mirth in him, nor any pleasure in this meeting. He said slowly: "Hi, Flash. Didn't expect to see me here, did you? You've drug your picket a long ways since the last time we met, but I see you're still doin' business!"

"Well, damn my eyes! *Neuces!*"

The man on the black horse laughed softly. It was not altogether friendly laughter, but his guns lowered. "Last time you seen me was just before you run out on me, as I remember! Reckon the surprise is mutual, eh, Kid? Who's the girl?"

Beth was out of the coach now, standing at Johnny's elbow, and Johnny shot a quick look at her. Her face was set, frozen. He said flatly: "No friend o' mine, I'm sorry to say. Just happened to be ridin' the same coach. How's for lettin' my hands down, now that you know me?"

"Sure, Kid. Anyway, I think you said a while ago your guns was empty!"

"That's right."

"How come? You didn't use to carry 'em empty!"

"I've changed since you knew me, Flash—more ways than one." Johnny shot another glance at the girl as he said it, hoping that she would find a meaning in his words other than the one he wanted to convey to the man before him. But if she did catch it, she made no sign. Johnny said slowly: "The guns were empty because I was a prisoner. Cass Linden, there, was takin' me in."

"Linden!" The black horse jumped forward and the rider leaned down, staring at Linden's half-hidden face. "Damned if it ain't, at that! I didn't get a good look at him, before. That blasted bounty hunter! What's he doin' up in this country? You reckon he was after *me?*"

Johnny grinned stiffly. "Might be. Five thousand dollars is a fat bait, Flash." He glanced again at the girl. "Me, I'm just small fry. The Neuces Kid—five hundred dollars' worth of outlaw."

Flash Haslam laughed. "He ain't so small fry, ma'am, when it comes to gunplay! He's fast, the Kid is. So Linden thought he'd collect *my* bounty, did he? Well, that's five thousand he'll never lay his hands on! Step aside, Neuces—"

"Wait, Flash."

Johnny's voice was flat, but his heart was pounding. He had anticipated this.

Haslam's tone was flat. "Wait nothin'! Don't start pullin' that chicken-hearted stuff on me, Kid—"

"I'm not," Johnny assured him. "All I'm askin' is—let me do it! I'm the guy he was takin' in, ain't I? I been thinkin' ever since he grabbed me what a pleasure it'd be to plug him!"

He had to make it sound real, as if it came from a real and bitter hatred. He had to do that—to fool Haslam.

He waited, watching the effect of his speech; watching it's effect on Haslam—and on the girl. He saw her glance at him; saw her eyes fill

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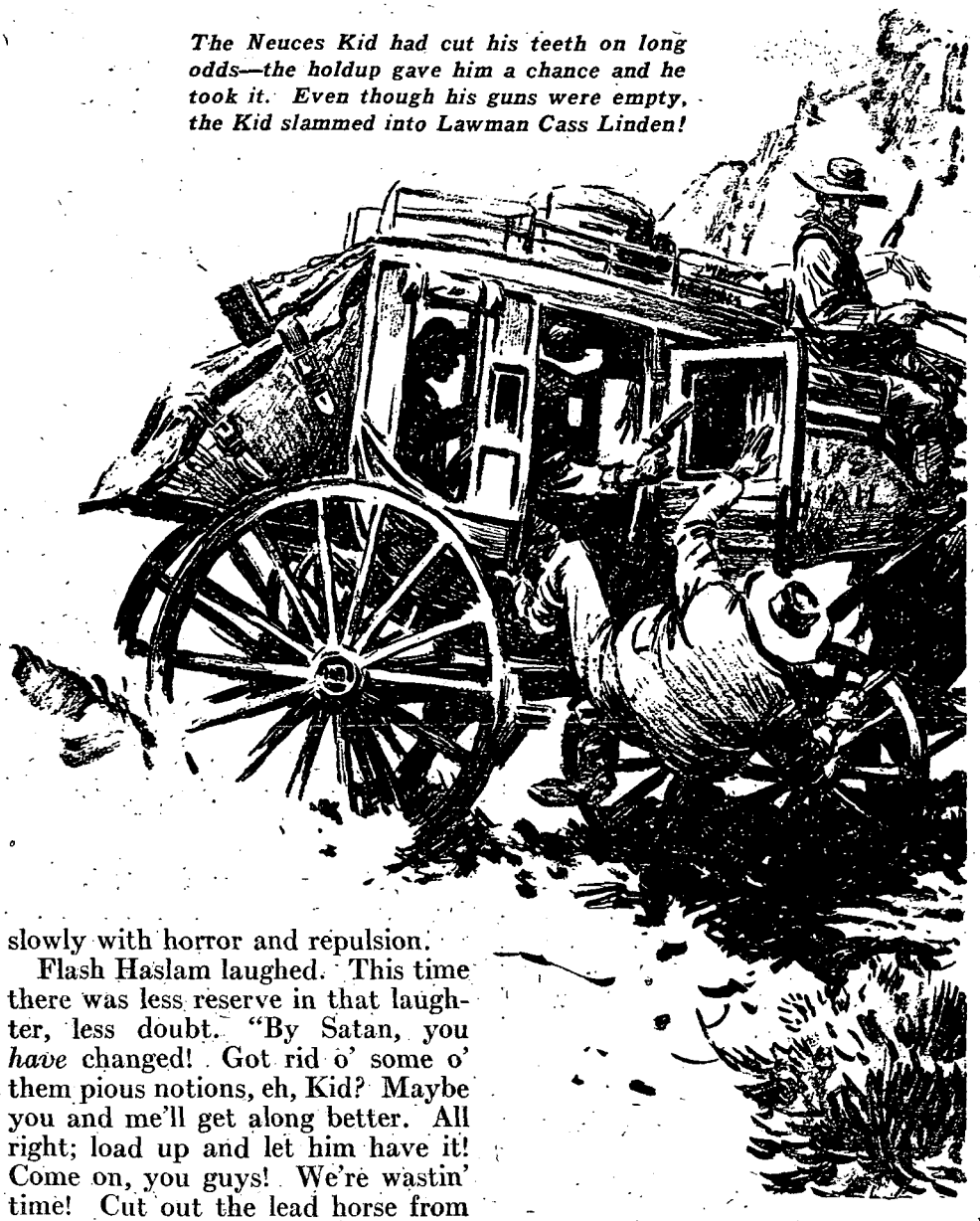

The Neuces Kid had cut his teeth on long odds—the holdup gave him a chance and he took it. Even though his guns were empty, the Kid slammed into Lawman Cass Linden!

slowly with horror and repulsion.

Flash Haslam laughed. This time there was less reserve in that laughter, less doubt. "By Satan, you *have* changed! Got rid o' some o' them pious notions, eh, Kid? Maybe you and me'll get along better. All right; load up and let him have it! Come on, you guys! We're wastin' time! Cut out the lead horse from the coach team. We'll have an extra man with us."

Beth moved away from Johnny, walking stiffly, her hands held rigidly against her hips. Johnny lifted his left gun, thumbed lead into the chambers, holstered it again. He drew the right gun and loaded it, too. Haslam was watching him, but Haslam was watching other things, too—the girl, and the activity of the men around him.

JOHNNY stooped stiffly and hooked the fingers of his left hand into Cass Linden's hair. He lifted Linden's head a little and laid the gun muzzle against Linden's temple.

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can use a man like you in my business! Come on. Fork that horse and let's get started. The girl don't matter much, I reckon. Time she gets anywhere to tell the story we'll be in the tall timber."

The crack of the shot was oddly loud in the waiting silence. Cass Linden's legs jerked. Johnny let the man's head fall then, tipping it this time so that the blood-smeared wound was visible.

He looked at Haslam. "O. K.?" he asked.

"O. K.! Good riddance, too! You've changed, all right! And I

It was lucky, Johnny thought grimly, that the blow he had hit Linden had cut that gash over the man's temple! Lucky, too, that Linden had fallen so that gash was hidden. It had bled freely, and that wound, seen from any reasonable distance, might easily be mistaken for a bullet hole. Haslam had so mistaken it, at least. And the spurt

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of dust where the bullet had actually landed had been hidden by Linden's body.

Linden might be temporarily deaf in that ear when he wakened, but that was better than what Haslam would have given him! Johnny wondered if the girl would ever see that —would ever realize that he had saved Linden in the only way he could save him. He wondered, too, if Linden would ever know it, or ever thank him.

But he thought grimly, too, that it made little difference. Today, for a little while, he had left the past behind him. Today, for a while, he had seen a future tinged with hope; a future with a clean slate behind it, with all debts paid and a chance for a man to make up for past errors. A chance even to make a home.

He had even thought of himself, there for a few hours, as Johnny Hardin. It had been a long time since that name had meant much to him, even in his own thoughts. He was the Neuces Kid, gunman, with a five-hundred-dollar bounty on him.

Well, he was the Neuces Kid again, deeper in the mire than ever! Riding beside Flash Haslam through lengthening afternoon shadows, riding bareback on the horse taken from the coach team, Johnny felt gloom settle over him like a smothering blanket. The horse he rode fell naturally behind the other lighter faster horses, and Johnny hadn't the energy to urge him. Why should he? He had no desire to stick with Haslam. He had left Haslam once, and what had it got him? Whatever he did, alone or with Haslam, he was branded! He was an outlaw, wanted, hunted, hated.

CHAPTER III

OWLHOOT PROPOSITION

DEEP in such gloomy thoughts, Johnny was hardly aware of Haslam's presence beside him. The outlaw had reined back, letting the others ride ahead. Johnny heard Haslam chuckle. "You look like you'd lost your last friend, Kid. Ain't broodin' over what you done to Linden, are you? He had it comin'!"

"No." The Kid's reply was short, unfriendly.

Flash Haslam shrugged. "I'm glad to see you, Kid. Honest. I was sore at you when you run out on me; but I missed you. You got a head on your shoulders. Most o' these hombres I hire are just guns with bone and muscle behind 'em. You pack a couple o' fast guns yourself, but I can talk to you."

He leaned forward in the saddle, his voice persuasive. "Look, Kid. You ain't the only one that's changed. I've changed, too. This thing today is the first stick-up job I've pulled since I hit Wyoming. Sounds funny, don't it? But I got a scheme here that beats holdups! Only reason I pulled this one today, I needed quick cash and I heard there was a nice wad comin' through, and I couldn't resist it. It was there, too. That box was packed with it.

"But about this scheme o' mine. It can't miss, Kid! And there's a fortune in it. Once it's done, we can go straight for the rest of our lives if we want to, on the profits! The one thing I needed was a man I could trust, a man with some brains, to work with me. I was only wishin' yesterday that I had you with me.

"Listen! I cleaned up down South; hit this country with plenty o' money. I hadn't been here a week

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till I saw that this range was ripe for trouble. Nesters rollin' in, buyin' land and homesteadin' it, stringin' fences—cattlemen boilin' up against 'em. Kid, where there's trouble like that, a smart man can make money! I bought me a ranch, the Hashknife. Hashknife's an old outfit, been here a long time; but it was run down. I got it at a bargain, weeded out the old crew, and brought in my own men. Gunhands, sabe? I brought in some other men, too, and set 'em to rustlin' cattle. With me to help 'em market the beef, it's easy. I squawk as loud as any of 'em about rustlin' losses, o' course, so I'm in solid with the cattlemen. The nesters get the blame, naturally—

"But I'm in solid with the nesters, too. I've talked for 'em, and I've loaned 'em money. What's more, I've staked some claims o' my own—or had men stake 'em for me. Naturally, them claims are signed over to me, so they're mine as soon as they're filed on. And it's them men o' mine that're makin' the most o' the trouble for the cowmen!"

HASLAM chuckled. "You see what I'm doin'? Addin' fuel to the fire! Wright and the other ranchers are already hirin' gunmen. They smell war comin'. Gettin' ready for war costs money. With rustlin' bein' so bad, Wright and the others ain't got the cash; so they borrow. From me! I got mortgages on half the cattle outfits in this valley! Mortgages I got from sellin' their cattle! Is that smart, Kid, or ain't it?"

"It's smart," Johnny agreed, "but what does it get you?"

"It gets me this! The war is about ready to bust loose. Fact is, it starts tomorrow."

"How can you set the date so accurate?"

"Listen! There's a guy named Cody—Dave Cody—that's sort of a leader among the nesters. He's really a cowman, in a small way, but he's bought land that used to be a part o' Wright's range. Wright hates him, and so Cody's sort o' drifted over with the nesters. Well, Cody's goin' to be killed, sabe? By the cowmen. That'll make the nesters sorer than they are now. They'll hit back by burnin' haystacks and line shacks, killin' cattle and any cowboys they happen to bump into. The cowmen that kill Cody will be my men. The nesters that lead the hell-raisin' afterward will be my men. Sabe?"

"Sure. And once you get the war started, you'll pull your men out, bushwhack both sides, keep 'em fightin' till every last one is bled white. And then you'll move in, consolidate your nester claims, foreclose your mortgages on the ranches—and own the valley!"

"Right! I said you had a head on your shoulders! That's exactly what I'm plannin'. And it can't fail! All I need is a man on the inside with Wright. That old codger is smart; he's apt to smell a rat and go haywire. If he does, I want to know what he's plannin'. That's where I want *you*. I got men with Wright now, but they're dumb. Loyal enough, but bone-headed. How about it, Kid? You throw in with me now and before you know it I'll be makin' you wealthy."

There was a silence broken only by the *clip-clop* of the horses' hoofs. Johnny said slowly: "One question I been meanin' to ask you. You know anybody here by the name of Afton? I heard the name somewhere. Which side's he on?"

"Afton? Nobody by that name

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in this country. He must've moved. There's a question I want to ask you, too, Kid. It might make a difference. That stage driver and guard—did they get a good look at you, you reckon? Would they recognize you?"

"No. Linden and me, we was in the coach when they came out with the express box. And they was above me, after the holdup. About all they'd see o' me then was the top o' my hat."

"Good! And how about the girl?"

"She—" Johnny thought swiftly. "Oh, she don't matter. She's just passin' through. Lives in Nebraska somewhere. Takin' the train east sometime tonight."

Haslam chuckled. "Then we're all set! Soon as we mess up our trail a little we'll head for the Hashknife. I'll fix you up with a horse and an outfit, and you'll hit old man Wright for a job. With you there, wise to what Wright may be plannin'—"

"How do you know," Johnny asked, "that Wright'll hire me? And even if he does, what makes you think he'll tell me, a newcomer, what he's plannin'?"

Haslam laughed softly. "That's the payoff, Kid. Not very long ago Wright sent out for a Federal lawman. First I knew of it was yesterday. This lawman shows up and one o' my boys knows him. Well, to make a long story short, this lawman heads for Wright's place, but—he don't get far. He had Wright's letter on him, which is how I knew Wright sent for him. He had a nice shiny badge, too, pinned inside the waistband of his britches."

"I see," Johnny said slowly. "When I hit Wright for a job, I'll be wearin' that badge. Seein' that, he'll hire me—and trust me; let me in on whatever he's plannin'."

"Right! So what d'you say, Kid?"

"One more question: "You're a well-known man, mister. There's posters all up and down the country carryin' your pictures. How do you figger to get away with this?"

FLASH HASLAM laughed. "Didn't I say you wasn't the only one that's changed!"

He yanked his hat off, and the mask with it. Johnny looked—and sat staring. This was Flash Haslam, all right—but a different Haslam! Flash Haslam, as the Southwest knew him, and according to the pictures and descriptions on the posters, was a big smooth-faced man with a mop of curly light-brown hair. This man's hair was thin and black, oily, with never a wave in it. The thick, squarely cut mustache, also black, altered the lines of his face completely. The change was amazing.

"If I'd seen him without his mask," Johnny thought, "I wouldn't have known him!"

Haslam said softly: "Meet John Patton, Kid. That's the name I go under here. Well? Think they're apt to recognize me?"

"No. You're changed all right. Cass Linden himself wouldn't know you! O. K. You furnish me with a horse and an outfit, and that badge, and I'll see Wright. I ain't sayin' I can help you—"

"I'll take a chance on that," Haslam said crisply.

Those last two sentences, his own and Haslam's, gave Johnny a secret glow of satisfaction. It was a thing he would be able to remember later—the fact that he had never actually told Haslam that he would help him. He had the Western code of loyalty, made doubly strong by his experience as an outlaw. If he had

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promised to help Haslam, the memory of later treachery would have stayed with him; but he had not done that. He'd said: "I ain't sayin' I can help you." It was a narrow distinction, perhaps, but it was comforting.

He thought: "Anyway, I couldn't have refused outright. After what he's told me, he'd kill me if I refused him—to keep me from spillin' it. And I've got to do somethin' about Beth! Funny, Flash not knowin' her father. If anything's happened to her dad, she's in a peck o' trouble, landin' here with nobody to help her, with this country in the shape it's in! And if somethin' *ain't* happened to him, he's in trouble—or will be! Because he's sure to be mixed up in this business some way, and what Haslam is plannin' will ruin him. Besides, I've got to square things with Cass Linden."

It would, Johnny knew, mean riding a narrow trail between conflicting loyalties, with sure death as the penalty for the least misstep. And at the end of that trail, even if he should reach it, Cass Linden would be awaiting him; Linden—and jail.

But it was a case of ride that trail or join Haslam—join him actually and without reservation. And joining Haslam now meant turning his back forever on any hope of cleaning the slate behind him. Outlawry now meant outlawry forever.

A week ago Johnny might have chosen differently. Bitter and hopeless as he had been then, he might have said: "I've tried and failed. What chance would I have buckin' Haslam, with both sides against me?"

But since then he had met Beth Afton. Since then he had seen a vision of a future unshadowed by the past. It made a difference! Even one chance in a million was worth taking if it led toward that dream's fulfillment!

CHAPTER IV

GUN-SMOKE CHALLENGE

IT was night when they arrived finally at the Hashknife, and Johnny saw little of the country. Flash Haslam, in his role of John

Patton, went into town that night, leaving Johnny at the ranch; and Johnny waited, racked by the fear of Haslam's reaction to the news that Cass Linden was, after all, alive. But Haslam came back at midnight, swaggering and unworried. Of Linden, he said only: "Nobody knew him, I reckon. I heard they had his body at the undertakers."

And so Johnny Hardin, alias the Neuces Kid, went to bed that night relieved, but puzzled. Relieved, because Haslam's belief in Linden's death saved Johnny from immediate trouble; but puzzled as to why

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Haslam and evidently the public generally had been deceived.

Next morning, riding the big sorrel he had picked from the Hashknife remuda, and following directions given him by Haslam, Johnny rode westward toward old man Wright's headquarters; and this ride gave him his first real conception of what was brewing in this country.

The range was dotted with nesters—plowmen. Ugly shacks stood here and there, surrounded in most cases by barbed-wire fences, peopled with grim-faced, lank-bodied, toil-hardened men and women who stared at him with open hatred.

Johnny knew that hatred, respected it and pitied it. He knew, too, the other side of the picture: the hatred and resentment of the cattleman against these intruders. For this was the old, old story of cattleman against farmer, unchanged since Bible times; a story rewritten in the West in countless bloody chapters. Cattlemen, following close on the heels of discovery, had held this land for themselves and their sons and their herds. Now the government in Washington had said: "This land is not yours. It is open for homestead or purchase." And the cattlemen had seen the nesters come, knowing that the land itself—its droughts and its vicissitudes—would whip these intruders in the long run, but knowing too that the intruders would spoil the land for cattle. Their plows would turn up dry, mealy soil that would blow and leave the grasslands naked. Their fences would turn thirsty cattle away from precious water.

And the nesters, knowing that hatred, had given hatred in return. Hatred for the ranchmen, and hatred for the slim, booted, arrogant, gun-wearing men, the cowboys, who hated barbed wire and nesters almost as much as they hated sheep and sheepmen.

This was a powderhouse of trouble, wanting only a match to light it. And Haslam was the match that would set it off; explode it in blood and gunfire to his own profit.

There was other evidence of this same unrest in the R J ranch yard. There were men here, idle and waiting; more men than even a spread such as Wright's could justify. And they were fighting men, hired for warfare—not cowboys. Johnny knew the breed and he knew the symptoms. These men lounging around the R J bunkhouse and on the porch of the main building, these men who eyed his coming with such veiled attention, were "Texas men"—warriors, hired for their skill with guns. It struck Johnny that there might even be men here who would know him. But if so, they would probably be men planted here by Haslam, in which case his own connection with Haslam would protect him.

JOHNNY saw Wright in the R J office, in the main house. Wright was, Johnny thought, exactly what he had expected: a big, grizzled man, sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued and tempery. Wright's glance took in every detail of Johnny's appearance, appraising him.

"You want a job, I reckon," Wright said sourly. "Hod-dang it, I'll be glad when the time comes I can hire cowmen, not men loaded down with hardware! Texan, ain't you? And a two-gun man. All right, Tex, throw your warbag in the bunkhouse. You're hired."

"There's more to it than that," Johnny said smoothly. He swung the door shut behind him and

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stepped forward, tossing a letter onto Wright's desk. He turned the waistband of his trousers down, giving Wright a glimpse of shiny metal. "Deputy United States marshal," he said crisply. "You sent for me. There's your letter. My name is Hardin; Johnny Hardin."

Wright's eyes glinted. He stood up, thrusting a hamlike hand across the desk. "I'm glad to see you, mister! Mighty glad! Only I reckon you won't be wantin' me to show how glad I am, to everybody—right?"

Johnny said, grinning: "Damn right you're right!" And Wright's big laughter boomed between the walls.

"O. K. So the less time we spend here palaverin', the better it'll be. Which means I better give you all the dope I can in a hurry. I'll talk and you listen. I reckon you know this is trouble between cattlemen and nesters. Government throwed the land open and they started comin'. Nothin' we could do. First off, it wasn't so bad, though it was a nuisance, havin' 'em cut up the range. Then they started makin' trouble. Rustlin'. Not just a steer here and there for beef, the way nesters always do in cow country, but big-scale rustlin'! Some o' the boys caught one of 'em the other day, and they lynched him. Can't say I like that kind o' business, but what the devil! It's old range law. Catch a rustler, string him up. Trouble is, the nesters think he was strung up for bein' a nester, not for rustlin'. They've retaliated by killin' a lot o' cattle—mine and anybody else's they could find."

Wright was scowling now, angry with a cowman's anger at this wanton destruction.

"There's been other trouble; shootings and the like. But it ain't a patch on what's due to happen—and soon! Patton, a man that owns Hashknife east o' here, told me yesterday he found a nester shack built in the mouth o' Snake Canyon. Patton says there was four men there, tough-lookin' hombres. They told Patton they was fixin' to dam Snake Creek. Irrigation! Bah! If they try that, it'll ruin every rancher in the valley—if we don't ruin them first! Ruin every nester, too; only they don't know that, and won't believe it."

"How do you figger?" Johnny asked. "Looks like, with water, farmin' might work."

"With water, sure! But a dam in Snake Canyon ain't gonna provide water! Snake Creek runs barely enough water in a year to keep the holes from runnin' dry. Buildin' a dam in Snake Canyon would simply back up what little water there is into the badlands—leave this valley a desert. Them nesters is crazy!"

"Looks like you could prove that to 'em, if it's true," Johnny said slowly.

"I can prove it—by makin' a survey—and if I could get anybody to listen! But there ain't gonna be time for that now. There's a delegation goin' today, one man from each of the big ranches, to see Cody. Cody's got a place on Snake Creek. He's a cattleman, really; but he's sort o' sided in with the nesters, fer some reason. I'm supposed to send a man from here, and you're the man."

Johnny stood up. "O. K. What're my orders?"

"Orders? Hell, I reckon you're in a position to give me orders! Only thing is, I'm tryin' to avoid fightin' till I can convince them nesters that what they're plannin' is foolish. If that sounds like sense to you, them's your orders. I'm suggestin' you do

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the best you can to keep the argument with Cody verbal. A gun fight would start a war there'd be no stoppin'; whereas if we can gain some time, maybe we can avoid that."

"That sounds like sense to me," Johnny said. "I'll do my best."

LATER, riding southward with the four men who had come for him, Johnny reviewed his talk with Wright and was pleased by it. Wright was a fighter, a man who would carry this trouble to its ultimate conclusion once it was forced on him, but he was willing to arbitrate. That was something, at least. It left a door open for peace.

But this delegation to Cody was the opening gambit, apparently, in Patton's plan—Flash Haslam's plan—for war. These men might be representatives from each of several ranches, but they were Patton's men; men planted by Patton on the various ranches. How they had come to be picked for this business, Johnny had no way of knowing. But they were here, and their presence fixed the odds at four to one against Wright's hopes for peace; four to one against Johnny Hardin! These men were not bent on any peaceful mission. They were surly, and keyed up for trouble. Too, they were suspicious of Johnny, unsure of his position in this business. In such a mood they would, he knew, be hard to influence.

Johnny got a new slant on the setup when they halted on a ridge overlooking Cody's headquarters. This was a cattle outfit, not a nester's shack; a small spread, but a neat one. Johnny mentioned that to the man beside him.

"Sure, Cody's a cowman," the man declared, "but he's throwed in with the nesters. He's on homestead land; land that's part o' the R J range. Cody took a claim himself, and bought two-three more from other nesters, and from the government. He's in deep. That's why the nesters trust him."

One of the men was scanning Cody's ranch yard with a telescope and he lowered it now, cursing. "He's there, all right, and Bill Riley's there with him. They're settin' on the porch."

"Riley?" It was Johnny who asked the question.

The man with the telescope laughed shortly. "Brother o' the jasper we strung up fer rustlin'," he said. "Reckon he's come cryin' to Cody fer sympathy!"

"We better wait, I reckon, till he leaves," Johnny said slowly. "Man in the mood he's apt to be in won't be inclined to any peaceful discussion—not with some o' the men who lynched his brother!"

"Who the devil wants a peaceful discussion?" The speaker laughed harshly. "You've been listenin' to Wright! Well you can forget what Wright told you. We got our orders—and they ain't from Wright! Bill Riley ain't a part o' them orders, but he's a nester! We fixed one o' the litter; here's a chance to get anothern! Come on!"

It was going to be even harder than he had expected, Johnny thought. These men were not only ready for trouble, they were eager for it; had their orders to provoke it. Added to that was the presence of the man Riley, and his certainly explosive state of mind.

"All I can do," Johnny thought grimly, "is ride along and see what I can do when the time comes." He wasn't hopeful. Wright would be disappointed in him, and angry. And any movement for peace he made would turn Haslam against him.

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The hawk-faced leader of the delegation signaled a stop just short of the Cody house, and the others lined up beside him. Johnny kept a yard or so behind them, alert and watchful. There were two men on the porch yonder, and it was easy enough for Johnny to identify them. Dave Cody was a big man, hatless, with a middle-aged, friendly-appearing face. Bill Riley was small and wiry, younger than Cody, dark and scowling. Cody wore a gun in a hip holster, but it was his only weapon. Bill Riley had a gun at his hip and a Winchester carbine tightly cradled in his arms.

One of the men with Johnny said flatly: "We're from Wright, Cody. You're squattin' on land that belongs to him. Our orders is to move you off of it—and pronto, sabe? We're givin' you one hour. An hour from now we're settin' fire to the buildings."

It was curt, brutal. Johnny said sharply: "Hey! I'm representin' Wright! He never said—"

A man wheeled, facing him. The other three still faced Cody and Riley. "Keep yer trap shut, cowboy! I don't know where you stand in this, but we got our orders! You keep your lip buttoned, if you aim to stay healthy!"

Beyond, Bill Riley said hoarsely. "This is them, Cody! Two o' these jaspers, maybe more, was in the crowd that lynched Charley! I seen 'em!"

Johnny Hardin sat rigid, waiting. This thing was planned, deliberate. What he did now would make or break him.

Dave Cody said slowly: "It's hard for me to think Wright would send those orders. Tell Wright I'll come and talk to him."

"Talk, nothin'! You move or—"

The threat broke off. The man facing Johnny turned swiftly, expecting trouble. Then he, too, sat motionless.

JOHNNY leaned aside a little, seeking the cause of this silence. There was a third figure on the porch now—a girl standing just back of Dave Cody; a girl holding a double-barreled shotgun at the level; a girl Johnny would always remember.

Beth Afton!

She said softly: "You men had better go—quickly! This gun is loaded with buckshot."

She stopped speaking, her gaze fixed now on Johnny's face. He saw her recognize him, saw the shock of that recognition stagger her for a moment. The gun wavered. A horse lunged at her, a rider swooping down out of the saddle to wrench the weapon out of her fingers. Bill Riley yelled: "You back-shootin' murderers!" His rifle cracked, and one of Johnny's companions crumpled in the saddle.

It was Riley's last action. These men of Haslam's were trained fighters. Guns roared, pouring lead at Riley with a smashing impact that carried him back and down. That much of the fight was ended within a split second of its beginning. Dave Cody would be the next target.

Johnny's own guns were out now, his thumbs hooking the hammers. He saw Cody reaching for his own weapons, saw Beth scrambling up from the dirt where the gunman's horse had knocked her. This was his fault, he thought bitterly. It was the sight of him that had jolted her, caused her to lose the drop of the intruders.

He barked: "This way, Hashknife! I'm with Cody!"

He saw the hawk-faced leader wheel toward him; saw a second

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rider also wheel, guns blazing. Dropping, Indian fashion, Johnny hooked his heel around the bulge of the saddle, one gun above his horse's neck, the other below it. His first shot caught hawk-face in the belly. He saw the man crumple and sag forward.

He swung up into the saddle again, thumbing two fast shots at the second man who had turned to face him. He saw Dave Cody claw his gun free finally and fire; saw the shuddering impact of that bullet in one of Haslam's riders. A bullet nicked his arm hotly and lead snatched at his hat. He had both guns level now, the recoil kicking his wrists up. A man went down before him and he turned slowly, seeking a target. It was hard to believe that this thing was over.

CHAPTER V

WARNINGS GO UNHEEDED

SUDDENLY Johnny heard Cody's voice beside him, sharp with excitement: "I don't know who you are, mister, nor what you was doin' with these devils, but you sure saved my bacon! Are you bad hit?"

"Hit? No." Johnny stood for a moment, wondering how and when

Johnny Hardin felt the hatred of the homesteaders for all cowmen. The range was a powderhouse of trouble, and Johnny—the Neuces Kid—had taken chips for the payoff.

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he had dismounted, dizzy with the reaction of those wild moments. Four to three—and the four were dead! He and Cody and Bill Riley against four hired killers. Riley had downed one, Cody another—

He thumbed fresh cartridges into his guns, dropped the weapons into their holsters. The bullet cut across his arm was barely skin deep.

Beth Afton stood before him, and Johnny looked at her. Her face was deathly pale, but she was game! He saw that; wondered how many women could have taken the shock of this battle as well.

"What kind of a man are you?" the girl asked slowly. "I liked you, yesterday—and then I hated you when I thought you'd killed Linden! And then, when I found you hadn't— But you went away with those outlaws and—and now, today—"

Dave Cody said flatly: "What is this, Beth? You know this man?"

"Yes, father. He was on the stage yesterday. Mr. Hardin, this is Mr. Cody, my father."

"Father?" Johnny looked from one to the other.

"Stepfather," Cody said. "Only Beth and me, we sort o' forget that part of it. Suppose *you* talk!"

Dave Cody. So that was why Haslam didn't know anybody by the name of Afton!

"I'll talk, in a minute," Johnny said slowly. "First—what about Cass Linden?"

Beth Afton answered him. "He's all right. After you'd gone—the guard, you see, was badly hurt—the driver took one of the horses and rode for help. The guard was unconscious most of the time, and Mr. Linden and I talked. I told him why you hit him, what you did later. He . . . he said—"

"Yes?"

"He said: 'There's good in him, or he wouldn't have saved me. But he's made his choice now, I reckon; joinin' Haslam again.' But he said later: 'At that, I'll play along with him as far as I can. If Haslam finds out the Kid tricked him about shootin' me, the Kid's days will be numbered!' So when help came, he got them to pretend he was dead."

Johnny nodded. "I might've known Cass'd do that. He told you —about me?"

"Yes."

"I didn't have much choice, you see—about goin' along with Haslam. I ain't had much choice in what's happened since, either." He looked at Cody then. "What do you want to ask me?"

Cody's gaze pinned him. "I'll ask you first what you meant by sayin' you had orders from Wright—orders different from what these other men had. You said that, didn't you?"

"Yes. I saw Wright this mornin'. He sent me here to keep these other jaspers from playin' too rough. They were Has . . . Patton's men, you see, and Wright thought—"

"Patton? There's somethin' wrong, somewhere! These men were R J gunmen; they said as much. And look at the horses they was ridin': all wearin' Wright's brand."

IT was true! Johnny wondered blankly why he hadn't noticed that. Still, these were Patton's riders; men Patton had planted on various ranches.

He said: "That was to make you blame Wright for whatever happened. But Patton sent 'em—to kill you, so the nesters'd rise up and fight. That was what Wright wanted me to stop."

"Listen!" Cody's voice was sharp now, edged with anger. "I don't know who you are or what your

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game is, but Wright's a scoundrel, and you're either in with him or he's fooled you! John Patton never sent men to kill me. Patton's my friend! He's the one cattleman in the valley that's acted decent. I owe you a debt, and I'm grateful, but you'll have to keep your tongue off Patton—"

Johnny said: "But Patton is—" It was on the tip of his tongue to tell Cody that Patton was Flash Haslam. But if Cody wouldn't believe what had already been told him, he wouldn't believe this! None of the nesters would believe it. The only hope, then, was to tell Wright. Scoundrel or not, old man Damn Wright had a head on him! *He* could see through a millstone if you showed him the hole in it!

"All I can say is, don't let 'em rush you into trouble," Johnny said wearily. "Stop this talk about a dam. Yank those men out of Snake Canyon. They're not friends o' yours; they're not nesters. They're fakes, put there by— Never mind. Only, get a surveyor to tell you what a dam there would be worth. Wright says—"

"To hell with Wright!" Cody's tone was bitter. "I've been for peace! But now that Wright's sent men to kill me, do you think I'm goin' to listen to his say-so? What's this about men in Snake Canyon? About a dam? I know nothin' about any dam, or any men in the Canyon! Them's more of Wright's lies! I'll tell you what I'm goin' to do—and you can tell Wright! I'm callin' the nesters together! I'm goin' to advise 'em to stand up on their hind legs and fight! And I'll help 'em! I ain't no nester and never was, but I'm damned if I'll be shot at, or drove off my land either! You go and tell Wright I said so!"

Johnny made no answer. Cody wheeled angrily and marched houseward. Johnny was watching Beth now, wishing that she could help him. Caught as he was between Wright and Cody, he needed help; needed it badly. Both of these men were fighters, both of them angry. He wondered suddenly how Wright would receive him. Wright had sent him here to prevent bloodshed. Five dead men bore witness to his failure, and Wright was not a man to take failure calmly.

Johnny turned slowly and caught up the sorrel's reins. He put his foot in the stirrup and halted, conscious of Beth beside him.

"I . . . I don't know what to say to you," the girl said in a low voice. "I've been away. All this is strange to me. I don't know the right and wrong of it. And you—"

"I'm just an outlaw, with a price on my head," Johnny said flatly. "You don't know whether you can trust me, and I don't blame you. I'm what Cass said I was. What's more, I reckon I'm a fool; a fool for tacklin' a job here that I can't handle."

He mounted, and felt her hand against his knee. He looked down at her and saw that she was smiling. "I haven't thanked you, Johnny. And I do thank you. I . . . I don't know what you mean by 'a job here that you can't handle,' but this was a big job here, today, too. The odds were against you, and yet . . . you did all right!"

Her voice dropped then so low that he could barely hear it. "Thanks again, Johnny Hardin. Maybe you'll find a way to work things out. I hope you do."

She turned then, walking swiftly up the path to the ranchhouse. And Johnny smiled a little as he watched her go, a smile that was oddly gentle.

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"Maybe I will, at that!" he thought. "Maybe I will!"

THE big sorrel Johnny had picked from the Hashknife remuda was fast and tireless, but it was dark before Johnny arrived once more in the R J ranch yard. That was because Johnny had not made a straight return journey. He had ridden instead to Snake Canyon.

Wright had said that Cody's place was on Snake Creek, so finding the canyon had been easy. It meant simply following the creek into the mountains. And it had seemed important to Johnny that he do that. It was the one thing in all this maze of conflicting testimony that he could check.

What he found seemed to verify Wright's statements. First, the men he had found there. There were four of them around the new, crudely constructed shelter; four surly men, heavily armed and watchful, sitting idle, waiting. They were dressed like farmers, in flat-heeled boots, but the gear on their horses was the gear of saddlemen and they wore their guns like killers.

They gave Johnny the water he asked for, and said nothing, keeping a watch on him until he was through the canyon. If these were homesteaders, Johnny thought grimly, they were of a new breed!

West of the canyon, too, Johnny had found evidence that seemed to bear out Wright's statement. He was no surveyor, but he had an eye for the lay of a country and he could see that there was no basin west of Snake Canyon to hold dammed water. Unless the levels were deceiving, water backing up in the canyon would pour back into the badlands, as Wright had said.

Returning, he had ridden a wide circle around Snake Canyon, coming through the mountains by a steeper route. The trip had cost him several hours of hard riding, and he had learned very little; but that little seemed to bear out his estimate of old man Wright. He had judged Wright to be honest; a gruff, blustery, quick-tempered oldster, tactless and stubborn—but honest.

"And yet," Johnny thought, "Cody is honest, too! He's so like Wright that it's funny! Just as stubborn and just as tempery. With them two on opposite sides of the fence, no wonder Haslam's plan is workin'!"

There were two men in the shadows on the R J porch when Johnny stepped up on it and Johnny spoke to them, unable to see their faces in the darkness. They answered him, but something in the tone of those answers clicked a switch of warning in Johnny's mind. It was the sort of greeting that might be given a murderer on his way to the gallows!

Old man Wright was a burly, glowering figure in the lamplight as Johnny stepped into his office and closed the door behind him. The cowman stood up slowly. "So you finally got here! All right, tell me the story."

Johnny said slowly: "Judgin' by your tone, there's no need for me to tell it. Looks like you've heard it already—and formed your opinions!"

"I've heard it, or anyway I've seen the results!" Wright's voice was harsh, ugly. "And I've formed some opinions! Four horses came walkin' into the yard an hour or so ago with four dead men slung over the saddles! There was a note pinned to one of them dead men. Read it!"

He thrust a hand out, holding a paper for Johnny's inspection. The

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message on that paper was brief, bristling with challenge:

Here's your killers. Looks like you sent a boy on a man's errand. Call off your dogs, Wright, or you'll be sorry!

Before Johnny could speak, Wright's voice blared out at him: "Blast it, I thought I sent you to prevent this! To prevent trouble!"

Johnny said sharply: "Yeah! And sent four killers with me to *make* trouble! Don't you try ridin' *me!* I saw what happened! Was them men yours, or Patton's?"

His own anger matched Wright's for a moment and that fact checked the rancher a little and amazed him. He said, more calmly: "I told you they were Patton's."

"Then what were they doin' ridin' R J horses?"

"Huh?" Wright looked surprised. "I don't know how that could've happened! Coincidence, I suppose. Over the years, I reckon I've sold or traded horses to every outfit in the valley. What if they was R J horses?"

"COINCIDENCE!" Johnny flung the word back at him. "Man, are you blind? Four men, supposedly from four different ranches, are sent to kill Cody; and each of 'em is mounted on a horse wearin' the R J brand, so if they're seen you'll get the blame for the killin'—and you call it a coincidence! Listen, mister, I *killed* two o' them men! Why? Because they turned on me for tryin' to foller the orders you gave me! You want to know what happened? I'll tell you! Them jaspers told Cody *you* sent 'em; that you'd told 'em to give him exactly one hour, to get out—then to set fire to his buildings!"

"I don't believe it!"

"I don't give a hoot whether you believe it or not! It happened! There was a man there with Cody; a man named Riley. Seems he was some irritated already on account o' somebody had lynched his brother. Fact is, he identified two o' the men with me as men who had helped with the lynchin'. He wasn't in no shape to be bullied, Riley wasn't; and I don't blame him! He started the shooting, sure. But it wouldn't have made any difference if he hadn't. Them men with me were there for just one reason—to kill Cody. I tried to stop 'em, and they'd have killed me, if I hadn't been lucky!"

"I don't believe it." Wright's tone was less sure now, but he was stubborn. "You admit yourself that Riley started the fracas. And Cody hates me! Seein' my brand on them horses—"

Johnny brought his fist down hard on the desk top. He was bitterly angry now, and reckless. "Listen, you hot-headed old fire eater! Cody wants peace, the same as you claim you do! Hate you? Why wouldn't he hate you, believin' what other men have made him believe about you? But any hate he's got for you ain't the permanent kind. He's a cowman, same as you are. You're the same breed o' cats! Fact is, you're so much alike, it's almost funny! If you two quick-triggered nitwits would get together and talk things over, stop lettin' Patton sick you onto each other—"

"Ah!" Wright barked grimly. "So now it's Patton that's the villain! You listen t' me, mister! Patton's my friend! I won't listen—"

"Cody told me Patton was *his* friend!"

"Maybe he is. Patton's friendly to everybody. I ain't blamin' him for that. He loaned me money when I needed it—"

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"And took a mortgage on your spread! Didn't he?"

"Sure! That's business!"

"Yeah! And it'll be business, too, and mighty good business—for Patton—if he can sick you into a range war that'll keep you from payin' back that money so he can foreclose on you! Hang it, man, listen! Patton ain't what you think he is; he's an outlaw!"

Johnny was past all caring now, past caution. "Patton's real name is Haslam; Flash Haslam. I knew him in Texas. He's wanted—"

He paused, stopped by the rage behind Wright's blazing eyes. Wright said harshly: "That's enough, Hardin! That's a lie, and not even a good one! I've seen pictures of Flash Haslam, and descriptions. Patton ain't even like him! I'm beginnin' to wonder about *you*, though, now that you bring up the subject o' false identities! Seems plumb funny to me that a Federal officer would make a charge like that, knowin' it to be false! And a Federal officer *would* know it was false! Maybe *you* don't! But whether you're a Federal man or not, you failed—and you've lied to me. So get out, dammit! Get out, before I call my men in here and have you throwed out! I'm a patient man mostly, but you've riled me! Get goin'!"

Johnny grinned slowly. It struck him as strange that he was no longer angry. His anger had gone as swiftly, as suddenly as it had come. Liar! Old man Wright had called him a liar. It was a fighting word; a word that should make a man jerk guns out of holsters. But this was one time that Johnny did not feel it. It didn't touch him. He turned slowly and reached for the door.

The men he had seen on the porch were still there. He saw them again as he passed them; wondered how much of his talk with Wright had reached them. He mounted and headed east.

A patient man. Wright had said he was a patient man. And he had meant it! Johnny laughed wryly. There wasn't an ounce of patience in Wright's whole body! Nor in Cody's! Both men were like dogs, their hackles lifted, growling at each other, blind to everything but each other. Any time now they'd be at each other's throat. Words wouldn't stop them. They were deaf as well as blind! It would take a shock—something to jerk their minds off their crazy anger; like buckets of water over two fighting dogs!

"A shock," Johnny thought grimly. "And nobody to give it to 'em but me! It's a big order! Only way it can be done is by workin' both sides against the middle; and the middle is Haslam. And to do that, I've got to know what Haslam is doin'. Gee-up, horse! We're headin' for the Hashknife! You ought to be willin' to go there, but me—I'd sooner step into a nest o' sidewinders! If Haslam knew what I was doin', the sidewinders'd be safer!"

CHAPTER VI

ORDERS FROM A GUN BOSS

BUT Haslam, alias John Patton, was in a fine, expansive mood when Johnny found him. It was a surprise to Johnny, for he had expected that when Haslam learned of the miscarriage of his plans at Cody's he would be angry. But Haslam knew already what had happened at Cody's, and he was far from angry.

"It makes no difference," he said crisply. "The idea was to kill Cody so the nesters would rise against the cowmen. Instead, Cody killed some cowmen—so the cowmen will rise

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against the nesters. Fact is, they're already risin'!"

He chuckled complacently. "One o' the men I got planted at the R J rode here as soon as he could get away after them bodies arrived. That's how I knew about it. I've already sent riders to call in all the men I got scattered over the country."

"Nesters, too, I reckon," Johnny said flatly. "Includin' the four in Snake Canyon."

"Right. Some o' the nesters are my men, like I told you; and I've got one or two men on each o' the ranches. Also a dozen or more in town. Say, who told *you* about the men in Snake Canyon?"

"Wright." Johnny chuckled a little. "He was some sore about it. Said they was fixin' to build a dam there."

Patton laughed. "He better not get sore enough to crowd 'em! Them four hombres are some spooky; apt to be quick-triggered. They're wanted in Texas most as bad as we are, Kid!"

He paused, eying Johnny with a sudden suspicion. "One thing I can't figure," he said slowly, "is how you come out o' that fight at Cody's so lucky."

Johnny grinned at him. "It was like this. First gun that went off, that bronc I was ridin' went to pitchin'. Went plumb over backward and pinned me under him for a minute. Time I was free, it was all over. Then . . . well, you see, that girl that was on the stage with me, she's Cody's stepdaughter." He flushed convincingly. "She spoke a word for me, see, and . . . well, Cody let me go."

Patton laughed abruptly. "That's rich! O. K., Kid. We'll have to look out for that girl, eh? See to it she ain't hurt. She'd be nice to have around, eh? Later."

The implication there came near to breaking Johnny's pose. His fists itched to hit Patton, or to shoot him; but he kept his face smooth, hiding his anger.

"Now you're here, Kid," Haslam said seriously, "I need every man I got, either to ride with me or to round up the others. Me, I'm headin' for Cody's. What happened today was O. K., but I still want to get rid o' Cody. Alive, he'd lead the nesters and he might be dangerous. I'm sendin' the rest o' my crowd to pick up the men I've got planted. Their orders are, every time they pass any unprotected property, haystacks, or buildings, or the like, they're to fire it. The nesters'll think the cowmen are settin' the fires to get even for what happened at Cody's, and the cowmen'll think the nesters are settin' 'em. Smart, eh? But I started to say, about you—You'd better not ride with me, to Cody's. The girl'd see you, and there's no use spoilin' your play with her. And, not knowin' the country, you wouldn't be much good roundin' up the men. One thing you can do, though: you know the way to town. Suppose you ride in and see Ike Newcomb, at the Grizzly. Tell him to round up the boys that're in town and fetch 'em here, eh?"

"O. K. But wait. This Newcomb don't know me. Suppose he won't take my word?"

"Tell him you're from Kitridge. It's a sort of a password. When Newcomb hears that, he'll believe you."

"O. K. Only I'll need a fresh horse. Mine's petered. Anyway, in view o' what's comin' up, I'd sooner have one that ain't gun-shy! I'll get a horse saddled and get started."

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HE left Haslam then, trying not to appear hurried. But his nerves were jumping with the need for haste. He had to warn Cody! Had to get there ahead of Haslam! He wondered, even as he picked his new mount and saddled, whether Cody would accept his warning even if he were in time to make it. Beth would, but could she, or both of them, persuade Cody?

Cody had said he was going to rouse the nesters against Wright. Cody might not even be at the house when Johnny got there; or he might be the center of an angry group—a group already prejudiced against Johnny by Cody's own story.

But it was a chance Johnny had to take. He mounted finally and headed east; but once clear of Hashknife, he swung his new mount south and west, cutting back toward Cody's. The new horse was a buckskin, big and powerful, and Johnny nursed him carefully, holding the pace down until the horse was sweating, then letting him out gradually.

He had covered hardly more than half the distance when he saw the first red glow in the sky to the northward; the glow of a fire burning in the trail of one of Haslam's riders. Another mile, and there were three of those beacons. An hour, and there was seven!

Hay, stacked for winter feed for snowbound cattle, burning! Cabins, outbuildings, everything left unguarded, all would be ashes tomorrow. Haslam was sacking this valley, wrecking it, burning it, despoiling it, in order to subdue it, to make it his. Those fires would bring men out of lethargy into action; bring them out hot with hatred, ripe for battle.

Johnny swore tersely and urged the buckskin to a faster pace. It was a forlorn hope, one man against Haslam's raiders, one man carrying a warning to others who would be loath to accept it; yet it was worth trying. He had to try it!

In the darkness he almost passed the Cody buildings before he saw them. They were dark; nothing but black hulks in the shadows. But he was wary. Remembering what had happened here today, seeing those beacon fires against the sky yonder, Cody would be nervous, expectant of trouble. And there were men here, somewhere. Johnny could feel them!

He checked his horse at the far edge of the yard. "Cody? It's me —Hardin."

A moment passed before he got his answer. Then Cody's voice came back to him, edged and unfriendly. "What d'you want?"

"I've got to talk to you! Let me come in, Cody. You can keep me covered. My hands are up."

"All right, come on in. And I'll keep you covered all right! Don't think I won't!"

Johnny moved forward, his hands high, conscious of watching eyes in the darkness. It was a spooky feeling! It made the flesh crawl between his shoulders.

He reached the end of the short path leading up to the porch of the main house and stopped there, dropping the buckskin's reins. He lifted one leg over the horn and slid out of the saddle, keeping his hands up. One false movement here, and Cody would shoot—and ask questions later. Johnny knew that, and he took no chances.

The door was open when he reached it and he went through into pitch darkness. He heard the faint rustle of movement. The door closed softly behind him and a gun prodded his backbone. A match

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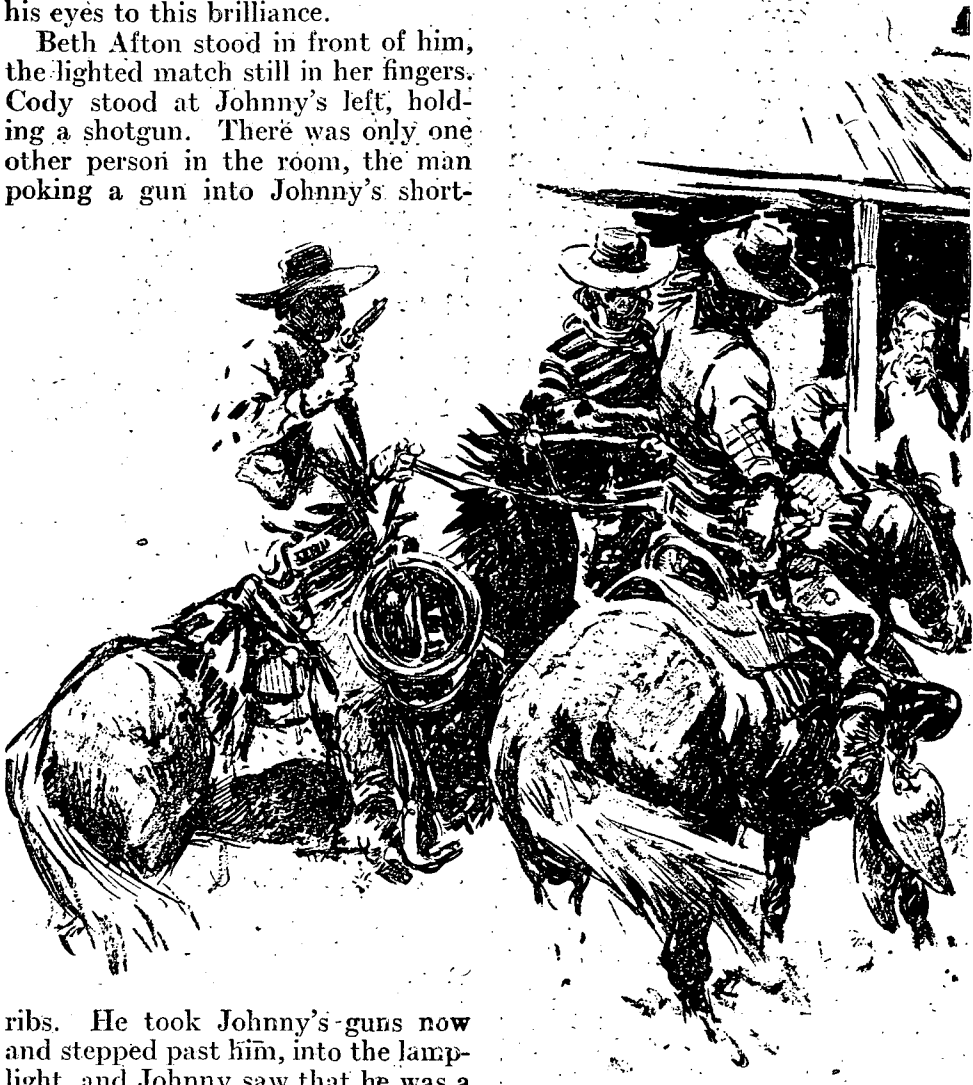
flared sharply and a lamp was lighted. Johnny blinked, adjusting his eyes to this brilliance.

Beth Afton stood in front of him, the lighted match still in her fingers. Cody stood at Johnny's left, holding a shotgun. There was only one other person in the room, the man poking a gun into Johnny's short-



ribs. He took Johnny's guns now and stepped past him, into the lamplight, and Johnny saw that he was a stranger.

"Pat Fargan," Cody said shortly. "One o' my riders."

"Riders? Where were your men today, when you needed 'em?"

Cody's voice was weary. "I got no money to hire a big outfit. My men keep busy. They were busy today. I'd have been with 'em, only Patton sent word he was comin' to see me. What's brought you here, this time? You come to finish what you tried to do earlier?"

"Dad!" The girl's voice made a sharp contrast to Cody's, like the note of a bell in the midst of discord.

Cody shrugged. "Well, Hardin?"

"Where are your men now?"

"Don't tell him, Dave!" Fargan said quickly.

The girl spoke reprovingly. "Hush, Pat. Why would he come here, if it

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The explosion came suddenly and Johnny found himself facing four hired killers with only two old men to help him.

wasn't to help us? Johnny, dad sent our men, when they came in from work, to round up our friends."

JOHNNY nodded. This night would be a-buzz with riders, criss-crossing, cutting the range on their various errands. He turned to the rancher.

"You've got to believe me, Cody. The man you know as Patton is Flash Haslam. He's thinned his hair, and dyed it, and grown a mustache; but he's Haslam! I used to ride with him."

He glanced at Beth.

"You needn't believe that till I can prove it," he continued, "but you've got to believe *this*, Cody! In a mighty few minutes there'll be men here—to kill you. To burn you out! A lot of them—enough so you and me and Fargan wouldn't have a chance! They'll be Haslam's men—Patton's; but if you won't believe that, it makes no difference. Whether

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you believe they're Patton's men, or Wright's, they're comin' to kill you!

"You see those fires?" He flung his arm out toward a window. "The cattlemen are goin' to blame *you*—you and the nesters—for them fires. The nesters are goin' to blame the cowmen. Because those fires are hurtin' both sides, Cody! I'm tellin' you, there's hell let loose out yonder; and you can't stop it."

"Then what d'you suggest?" Cody asked flatly.

"Get gone from here! Run! Hide! Get Beth to a safe place! That's all I'm askin'. I ain't lyin', Cody. I swear it!"

"I believe you," Beth said swiftly.

"I don't know what to believe," Cody said, shaking his head in perplexity. "Where could I go? If it's the way you say it is, ridin' out o' here would likely mean ridin' into worse trouble! Besides, my friends'll all be here in the mornin'—"

"There's the cellar," Beth said quickly. She looked at Johnny. "It's a cave, in the hillside. Even if they burned the buildings, we'd be safe there."

Johnny nodded. Dave Cody said: "That'd be as good a place as any, I reckon. Only—"

"Only you still don't trust me! Listen, I'll stay with you! What have you to lose? And what have I to gain, Cody?"

"He's right, at that," Fargan said. "I say we go."

Johnny sprang forward, caught Beth's arm. He saw Cody snatch up an assortment of weapons—the shotgun, two or three rifles, Johnny's own hip guns. Johnny whipped the lamp out as he passed it; let Beth lead him through the darkness to a kitchen door. The night was still when they reached it, and Johnny breathed a prayer of thanks. If Haslam's men had seen that light, hiding would have been hopeless!

But they were in the cellar a hundred feet distant from the main house, had been there for some moments, before the sound of hoofs reached them. Johnny said tersely: "Listen!"

"Reckon you was speakin' Gospel, young feller!" Fargan drawled. Cody grunted. And Beth squeezed Johnny's arm tighter.

Huddled there in the darkness, with the dank smell of the cave around them, Johnny was warmly conscious of the girl beside him. Cody and Fargan stood nearest the cave mouth, their guns ready. Johnny could barely see the black shapes of their heads and shoulders.

The hoofs were nearer now, pounding down from the eastward. They heard the attack halt, and scatter; heard a voice call: "Cody!"

Silence, and then that voice again: "The skunk has run! Well, we can get him later. Burn the buildings."

Fargan said softly: "It does sound like Patton, Dave; hanged if it don't! . . . Look!"

CHAPTER VII

HELP FROM THE LAW

JOHNNY pressed forward, felt the girl crowd up beside him. Flames burst suddenly from the stable, licking upward, painting the yard a hellish red. Flame moved swiftly, too, in the main house. One by one the smaller buildings were lighted. And men were moving against that firelight, their figures black against it, their faces showing now and again in the red reflections.

Johnny said softly: "There, Cody! There by the porch!"

A man stood where Johnny pointed, turning slowly, watching

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his men perform their tasks. The man was Haslam. His face, lighted now and again by the firelight, was plainly visible.

Cody's voice was a low, angry rumble. "It's Patton! Why, that—" He flung his hands forward, and Johnny grabbed him.

"Don't shoot!" Johnny warned. "Don't pull that trigger! Why, man, there's twenty gunnies out there! They'd swarm all over us!"

He felt Cody relax. Fargan said softly: "Youngster, here's your guns back. Looks like we was wrong to doubt you."

"That's right!" Dave Cody said hoarsely. "You'll never know how grateful I am, Hardin!"

Johnny dropped the guns in their holsters. "Forget it," he said shortly; but his voice carried the lilt of the first real hope he had had since this business began. The pressure of Beth's arm against his there in the darkness was a tonic. Cody's belief in him was a tonic. With Cody's trust, with Cody knowing what the plot against them was, there was a chance for victory!

The Hashknife men were mounting now, preparing to leave. Cody's buildings were beyond saving, flame-wrapped, walls tottering. Haslam's work here was finished.

Waiting there in the darkness, Johnny saw Haslam sweep the scene with one last look before mounting. Something checked him, and Johnny saw the man stand for a moment, one foot already in the stirrup, staring at something yonder in the darkness. He mounted then and Johnny heard his voice lift, ordering his men away.

Then Johnny forgot Haslam at the feel of Beth's arms around him. He turned and closed his arms around her and kissed her, feeling her lips cling.

Cody's chuckle told Johnny that the darkness was not complete concealment. "Maybe that'll show you that we ain't entirely ungrateful," the rancher said tersely. "So it's Patton! Patton, playin' both ends against the middle!"

"He's smart," Johnny said crisply. "Smart enough to keep in the clear, even with a five-thousand-dollar bounty on him. But you know, now, and you can act according. And you can convince the nesters. The trouble is, Wright still believes in him."

"But we can go to Wright, tell him what's happened—"

Johnny laughed harshly. "You don't know Wright! With his winter feed burnin', you think he'd listen to reason? He's on the warpath now, for fair! By daylight, he'll have every cowman in the valley on the hunt for nesters."

"Then what'll we do?"

Johnny said slowly: "Your men are spreadin' the word for the nesters to meet here, right?"

"Right. At daylight tomorrow."

"Some o' the nesters you're expectin', I reckon, won't be here. They were planted by Haslam, and they'll be joinin' him, not you. But when you've got your crowd together, head for town. If you run into the cowmen, surrender! Crazy as he is, Wright wouldn't turn his guns loose on men with their hands up, I reckon. But try not to meet 'em."

"But you; where will you be?"

"I'm headin' for town now. I got a message to carry. It's a message orderin' all of the men Haslam's got planted in town to join him at Hashknife. So the town'll be safe for you when you get there."

"I'll be there," Cody promised.

Johnny nodded. He hugged Beth tight for a second, then plunged forward, out of the cave. He was run-

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ning as he crossed the flame-lit yard to where his horse waited and he mounted in a long leap, not touching the stirrup. The buckskin lunged, snorting.

A sudden thought tensed Johnny's nerves. He knew now what had made Haslam pause, just prior to his departure. This horse! Haslam had seen it—must have recognized it.

"So now I've *really* got to lay low!" Johnny told himself tensely. "Flash'll pass the word for *his* men to get me, Wright and his cowmen won't be exactly friendly it *they* catch me—and if I was to meet any nesters that hadn't yet talked to Cody, *they'd* down me! This is what I get for tryin' to go straight! As an outlaw, all I had to dodge was the lawmen! Which reminds me, I've still got to look out for Linden! He'd grab me, if only for the bounty!"

It struck him suddenly that it was funny, this multiplicity of worries. "I can't get in much deeper!" he thought. "Maybe that's a sign that from now things'll get better!"

That thought, plus the memory of Beth Afton's arms around him—or her lips clinging to his—set Johnny's pulses to pounding. The feeling stayed with him in that ride through the darkness.

THE buckskin was winded when Johnny checked him at the south end of the main street of Bandera. Coming in at a gallop might rouse the town around him.

As nearly as he could judge, the town seemed normal. No undue excitement; no apparent tension. Evidently news of the trouble had not yet reached the village. Yet Johnny had the feeling that there was danger here; a sense of threat that was like a scent in the air around him.

A lighted window with a silhouette of a bear in paint on the glass marked his objective, and Johnny dismounted, looping his horse's reins loosely over the hitch rail. There in the shadows, he dropped both hands to his gun butts, lifting them a little, letting them settle back lightly into the leather. Ten to one, he wouldn't need them; after all, this was a simple errand. And yet—the years had given Johnny a sort of sixth sense, a hunted animal's sensitivity to trouble.

He pushed the doors inward and stepped through, letting them swing shut behind him—

On the side of the street opposite the Grizzly, two men stepped out of a dark doorway, crossed the walk swiftly and stepped down into the street. The taller of the two men said crisply: "You're sure, Linden?"

Cass Linden said: "It's him, all right. But it's funny, him ridin' in like this! I don't understand it."

The tall man grunted. "Now he's joined up with Haslam, he thinks he's got high-powered backin'. These small-timers get bold as brass, once they tie up with a man like Haslam."

"He was with Haslam before," Linden said, "and he was careful. Go easy, Meeker. I'm some puzzled. No gunplay, mind."

They were inside the Grizzly now, the tall man, Meeker, leading. Johnny Hardin stood alone at one corner of the bar, and Meeker stepped in beside him. Cass Linden moved in on the other side, watchful and troubled.

Johnny spoke softly to the barman. "Bourbon. . . . Is Newcomb here?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Me. Tell him I'm from Kitridge."

The barman glanced briefly at Johnny's neighbor, and turned away.

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The tall man at Johnny's left said sourly: "From Kitridge, eh? Is that the name Flash Haslam's usin' now?"

Johnny wheeled swiftly, his hands dropping. His first glance showed him the badge on the man's vest and the sight chilled him. To be arrested now! He said: "Haslam? Who's Haslam? And who the devil are *you*, for that matter?"

His right fist hooked up, swift and surprising. After all, he had no wish to shoot a sheriff! If he could hit clean and get clear—

The blow landed. The tall man reeled backward. Johnny sensed the stir of movement behind him and tried to turn. But he was too late. The blow caught him high, so that his hat helped save him. But it was hard; plenty hard enough to stagger him. Cass Linden had been in a hurry!

"I'm sorry, laddie," Linden said softly, "but in a manner o' speakin', it's tit for tat—and you one up on me yet, too!"

Cass Linden! Johnny was dazed, but that voice cut through the fog the blow had brought down around him. Linden! If only he could have avoided Linden a little while longer!

Strong arms encircled him, kept him from falling. He could see Linden as a gray blur, so the arms must belong to the sheriff. He heard the man who held him say gruffly: "The Kid packs a hell of a punch, Linden! Just take it easy, everybody! No need for any excitement!"

They were moving now, the sheriff half pushing, half carrying Johnny toward the door. Outside, he said: "Get his guns, Linden. All right, yonder's the jail. Start moseyin'."

Johnny's head was clearer now. "Cass, listen!" he pleaded. "I was tryin' to help you! You want Haslam, don't you? And you, sheriff—you want to stop this range war—"

A lighted doorway loomed ahead of them, and the sheriff said gruffly: "Inside!" The room they entered was an office. A hall opened in the

middle of the back wall, running down between two lines of cells.

The sheriff kicked the street door shut behind them. "Sit down," he said. "Well, Linden?"

Cass Linden said: "What's this, Kid, about Haslam? About your tryin' to help us? . . . This here is Sheriff Meeker."

Johnny gulped. He had to talk now, and talk fast! If he could just convince Linden—make him and the sheriff believe him.

"Look, Cass," he said. "I had to hit you, yesterday. I was willin' to go with you, take my medicine, but—"

He was off now, talking swiftly, pouring the words out in an endless succession. And Linden was nod-

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ding! Sheriff Meeker, too, seemed not so sour as he had been. Maybe —just *maybe!*

Johnny talked faster!

CHAPTER VIII

RENEGADE TRAP

IT was two hours later when Johnny once again stood at the bar in the Grizzly and ordered bourbon. This time, he hoped he'd get to drink what the barman poured for him!

The barman eyed him doubtfully. "Didn't hardly expect you back," he said slowly.

"Case of mistaken identity," Johnny told him. "Lucky I'm hard-headed!"

"You still want to see Newcomb?"

"Yeah." Johnny tossed off his drink. "Where'll I find him?"

"Through that door yonder. First room on your right."

It was taking a long chance, and Johnny knew it. The door the barman had indicated was closed, but it opened at Johnny's touch, and he stepped through it into a narrow hall. The door swung shut behind him, leaving the hall dark. A crack of light showed under a door at the right and Johnny knocked lightly.

"Come in!"

Johnny turned the knob and let his hand drop clear of it, pushing the door inward with his toe.

The man facing him across the room was fat, red-faced, and oddly motionless. He stood in front of a curtained window, one hand hidden behind him. His voice, when he spoke, was surly. "Come on in and shut the door! You say you're from Kitridge?"

Johnny stepped forward, and a voice behind him said: "Hello, Neuces—you low-down, double-crossin' skunk! Put up your hands!"

The premonition of trouble, that sixth sense of the hunted, had set Johnny's nerves on a hair-trigger tension. His nerves, and his mind. That voice was Haslam's. Haslam, who had seen Johnny's horse at Cody's and had come here to set a trap.

Johnny moved swiftly, without thinking. He lunged backward, throwing his whole weight into the effort, even before Haslam had finished speaking. He hit the door with his shoulder.

Haslam had tried to close that door, but Johnny's lunge caught it and slammed it back against the outlaw. The roar of Haslam's shot in that small room was deafening. Johnny felt the scorching blast of it across his ribs, but the door's impact had thrown the gun off aim.

The fat man yonder was whipping a gun from behind him. Johnny made his draw as he fell backward. He thumbed one shot from each gun, seeing the flames of those shots cross the hot tongue licking out toward him from the fat man's weapon. The fat man's shot had been fired a split second too soon—and a split second too late! Too soon for accuracy, too late to win. It hit the floor. Johnny's own slugs hit the fat man dead center and high, smashing him back against the window.

Johnny, too, was going backward, carried by his own momentum. All this was fast, almost between two heartbeats. The door sill tripped him. His shoulder hit something, something that yielded and stiffened. A man grunted. A voice said, "Hit him!" and Johnny ducked.

The blow caught him fair, and he thought grimly: "This is gettin' to be a habit!" He felt hands clutch at him, and he tried to break free, but he was weak, dizzy—

Darkness swirled up around him, but before it swallowed him he heard

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Haslam say crisply: "Why the devil didn't you plug him? Now we've got to get him out o' here, to keep him from talkin'. Take him to Hashknife."

THERE was a period then of which Johnny was only vaguely conscious. He was aware of pain, of movement, of rough hands tugging at him, lifting him, throwing him across a saddle—

They were at Hashknife when consciousness came back to him. A man dragged him down out of the saddle and Johnny's knees buckled. A voice said: "Listen! Somebody comin'. Haslam, I reckon—" And Johnny went limp.

Haslam, he knew, would want to question him, and Johnny had no desire now to face those questions! Unconsciousness was a sort of a protection.

He heard Haslam dismount; heard a voice ask: "What happened?"

Haslam's voice answered: "Soon as you'd gone I throwed a chair through the window. When the crowd came in out o' the bar, I told 'em the Kid got nasty and shot Newcomb, and then jumped out the window. How is he?"

"Still out."

"O. K. Drag him into my office."

More hands, tugging at him; more pain. This blow had been harder than Linden's; much harder. The darkness swallowed Johnny again, but only for a moment. He heard the door of Haslam's office close behind him, heard the thud of departing footsteps. But there was movement, too, nearer to him.

He opened one eye a little. This was a room that he had seen before. Haslam was there, kneeling beside the safe yonder. He was piling stuff into a suitcase; money, bundles of money!

Haslam turned once and shot a suspicious glance at Johnny. Johnny closed his eyes. When he opened them again the suitcase was closed. Haslam was bent over the desk now, and Johnny saw his own guns there by the outlaw's elbow.

This room had two doors: the one nearest Johnny, which led into the main room, and one yonder into Haslam's bedroom. Johnny could see from here that the second door was bolted.

He stood up carefully, making no sound. Haslam was stooped over, digging into one of the desk drawers. Johnny took two long quick steps—

A floorboard creaked and Haslam whirled. Johnny whipped one gun off the desk, clubbing the barrel across Haslam's temple. He saw Haslam's eyes glaze. He caught the man by the shoulders, easing him down. So far, there had been no racket.

He dropped that gun into his holster and snatched the other off the desk. He had to hurry! The door bolt slid back under his eager fingers, and Johnny paused briefly, thinking. Haslam would be awake in a minute, and his shout would bring men. Johnny remembered suddenly Haslam's own strategy: a chair through a window. That might mislead them, send them off on a false trail.

But no! They would notice, surely, that this door was unbolted. Unless he could leave it the way he had found it—

There was a piece of cord on the floor there by Haslam's body. It must have fallen out of one of the desk drawers. Johnny snatched it up, doubled it, hooked it around the bolt knob. There was a chair beside him. He picked it up, balanced it, tossed it at the nearest window.

He had the door open even as the crash sounded. He stepped through,

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pulling the door shut. The room was dark. He pulled the string carefully and felt the bolt slide. When it stopped sliding he released one end of the string and pulled it to him, through the crack between the door and its frame. Men were running now somewhere in the building; running and yelling.

"Who is it?"

The whisper startled Johnny. It was very low, very near to him in the darkness. He wheeled, slipping aside along the wall. In the room behind him, the room he had just left, a door crashed open. There was a babble of voices there, a tumult of movement.

Johnny said softly: "Same back at you! Who are *you?*"

"*Johnny!*"

HE knew that voice, but he couldn't believe it! "Beth! S'sh! What are you doin' here?"

He stepped forward and bumped into the girl in the darkness. His eyes were growing used now to the lack of light, and he could make out, dimly, another shape beyond her. He gasped: "Who's that?"

"It's dad." The girl was whispering, clinging to him. Johnny held her, hearing her, but listening also to the sounds back in Haslam's office. The window trick had fooled them! He heard someone say: "No, he couldn't have gone this way; the door's bolted on this side."

Cody stood beside him now, his voice a running murmur beneath the yonder confusion. "They came back just after you left us. They saw your horse, figgered we hadn't gone far. They killed Fargan, brought me and Beth here. They'd have killed me, too, only Patton suddenly remembered that I owned my land. He said to fetch me along and he'd make a deal with me for it. Reckon he figgers to force me into signing some sort o' papers."

"But if Fargan's dead, there's nobody left to tell the nesters what's happened!"

"No."

Beth had moved away now and Johnny could hear her moving somewhere in the darkened room. He said: "They'll be in here in a minute, huntin' me. I've got to go."

"No." Beth's whisper reached him as she came closer. "You can't. There's a man just outside our window. Even if you could get past him, the yard is full of men. There's a bed yonder. Quick; get under it!"

Johnny obeyed. And just in time, too. A door opened abruptly, spilling light into the room. A man stood in that doorway and Cody said gruffly: "What's all the uproar? Tell Patton I'll have the law on him for this outrage!"

Question and message were, Johnny thought, nicely chosen. Cody was a quick thinker. The man swore curtly and ducked out, slamming the door shut again. They heard the bolt click home and Johnny slid out from under the bed.

A man pounded down the hall and into the next room, the room that was Haslam's office. There was a long crack in one of the panels of the door between the two rooms, and Johnny glued his eye to it. The man in the other room was Haslam. A second man joined him.

"Find him?" Johnny heard Haslam say.

"No! Hell, in this darkness—"

Haslam swore. "Keep the others guarded. We don't want to lose them, too! I've got to go to town again; forgot somethin'. Won't be gone long."

The other man said gruffly: "Needn't worry none about the others. There's a man in the hall

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"I've got you covered, Hardin!" Cody's voice rang from the shadows. Johnny lifted his hands, realizing he was near the end of the trail.

outside their door and another'n outside the window. I'll stay here after you're gone, just to make certain. Or maybe I better go right in the room with 'em. Wouldn't mind doin' that. That girl's a looker!"

Haslam grunted. "Keep clear o' her! If anybody gets her, it'll be me, sabe?" He picked up the suitcase Johnny had seen him packing. He said: "Some clothes Newcomb left here. They was wantin' a suit to put on him when they bury him. I'll take this to 'em."

He stepped out of the range of Johnny's vision then, and Johnny heard the door close. A moment later a horse started somewhere in the yard, the hoofbeats dwindling. The man in Haslam's office lighted

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a cigarette and sat down.

A man in the hall, a man outside the window, a man in Haslam's office. All the routes of escape guarded. Johnny swore softly and felt Beth move closer to him.

"Please, Johnny," she whispered. "There's nothing you can do. You've done your best."

It was true enough. Only, his best had not been good enough. The thought pricked Johnny's pride and angered him. He thrust it aside, driving his mind into other channels. But it came back; came again and again through the hours that followed.

CHAPTER IX

SHOWDOWN AT THE HASHKNIFE

DAWN was making a pale glow in the east when the break came. Standing beside the curtained window, Johnny cursed the coming dawn because it would, he knew, bring trouble. He had sent Sheriff Meeker to talk to Wright and the other cowmen, to explain to them that Patton, alias Haslam, was their enemy—not the nesters. But there was no one left now to explain that fact to the nesters!

If Meeker had found the cowmen, they should be drawing near now, getting ready to smash down on Haslam's stronghold. But if they encountered the nesters—nesters gathered together by Cody's call, only to find Cody's buildings in ashes and Fargan's body beside them—there would be trouble. Those nesters, fired by tonight's doings, would shoot first and listen later! It would mean a battle, bitter and complete.

Then somewhere in the distance a man yelled harshly. The sound made little impression on Johnny's mind at first, but it was repeated; repeated and tossed along by other voices. He got it now, the one word that can fill men's minds with nighttime terror:

"Fire! Fire! In the stable!"

Fire! The very weapon Haslam had used tonight against the valley! The anonymous weapon intended to hurl the two valley factions into a bloody war. Haslam's own weapon turned now against him!

The man outside the window heard it, too. Johnny saw him stand up, stand hesitant for a moment, then run. There was a new glow in the yard now, the reflected glare of fire. The same glare that had lighted Cody's yard, earlier tonight.

Boots were thudding now throughout the house. Voices were lifted in wild shouts. The fire must be a big one!

Johnny said: "Come on, Beth—Cody! Here's where we make a break for it! Maybe, if we can get clear, we'll still be in time to stop those nesters!"

"We can try it," Cody said grimly. "Only why not make a job of it here first? They didn't burn only my stables! They burned my house too!"

"Fine! Rip open that mattress. Pile the bedclothes on it. We'll leave the window open to make a draft."

The match in Cody's hand caught gladly and the room brightened. Johnny lifted the window and handed Beth through it. He went next and waited below for Cody. The stable was on the far side of the house, so they stood now in shadow. There would be plenty of light later, when they ran out of the shelter of the house—light for shooting! But it was a long chance, even if a slim one.

Cody came through the window, smoke billowing out behind him. He coughed and swore. "O. K., let's go!"

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Johnny said: "Wait!" He was standing now just beside the window into Haslam's office; the window through which he had tossed the chair. And there was a man in that room, close to the window!

That was strange, because Johnny had heard the man who had stayed to guard that room leave it soon after the first shout of fire.

He jerked his hat off, lifting his head warily until he could look through that window. There was a man there; a man with his back to the window. A man busy now with the bolt to the door into the room Johnny and his companions had just deserted. The door opened and smoke puffed through it. The man choked and coughed, turning his head a little, smoke-blinded. He called softly: "Johnny! Johnny, lad, where are you?"

Cass!"

The man wheeled, his gun swinging. Johnny said swiftly: "Don't shoot! It's me—Johnny. Come on! We're leavin'!"

He stepped back and Cass Linden came through the window beside him. The sight of Beth Afton there in the shadows seemed to shock him. He stared at her and then at Johnny.

Johnny said swiftly: "What brought *you* here?"

"Who do you figger set that fire?" Linden asked curtly. "When I found out they'd took you, I started movin'. Thanks to the password you give me, it was not so deeficult." Stress of excitement was tripping Linden's tongue into old habits! "I met only one mon on me way to the stable and I said 'Kitridge' to him, and he made no move to stop me. But this is no place for to be talkin'! There's horses in front o' the house yonder—"

"Listen!'

IT was Beth who had spoken. The three men froze. Hoofs were pounding somewhere in the darkness, and men yelling. A gun cracked spitefully.

"That, I reckon, will be the cowmen," Linden said. "Your friends, the nesters, Mr. Cody, are already in position. They've surrounded this place and are waitin'. We didn't dare attack sooner, ye ken, till I'd freed the lad here—and yerselfs, o' course; though I'd no knowledge ye were here till this moment."

"The nesters?" Johnny questioned. "You mean— But they'll—don't you see, Cass, Cody here was to explain to them, but he was captured! When those nesters see the cowmen—"

"They'll join hands and unite in the rat killin'," Linden said shortly. "What d'you think I've been doin', laddie? When you was captured, I figgered we'd have to speed things up a little. So I sent a man to fetch the nesters. That's how come they're here early. Get movin', now! This place'll be fair lively in a minute!"

"Get goin'?" Johnny whooped. "Where? Why? I got some rat killin' to do my ownself!"

"And me!" Cody said briefly. "Leastways, I'd do some if I had a gun—"

"Which you ain't!" Linden said flatly. "So it's you will take the girl, now, while me and Johnny tend to some unfinished business! And, Johnny! Wrap a white rag o' somethin' around yer left arm, laddie. It's a mark we've agreed on, both the cowmen and the nesters, to keep from killin' each other."

"But I haven't a rag—"

"Here, Johnny." Beth stooped swiftly, and there was a sound of cloth ripping. Something white was slipped around Johnny's arm and was

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tied there. Soft arms encircled him then for a moment, and Johnny caught the girl close.

"Be careful, Johnny," Beth whispered. "I'll be waiting!" She was gone then, slipping past the front corner of the house toward where Linden had seen the waiting horses.

The beat of oncoming hoofs was nearer now, much nearer. A gun cracked viciously and someone yelled. Johnny was running now, charging down the length of the house toward the stable. Haslam's men would be there, drawn together by the fire. He heard Linden running behind him.

The yard was a bedlam. Haslam's gun hawks milled wildly, caught in the fire's glare under a lashing cross fire. Guns stabbed at them out of the darkness: nesters' guns, firing from cover, avenging wrecked homes and dead neighbors.

And then suddenly the thunder of hoofs broke through that racket, and Johnny saw Haslam's crew break and reel back before the onslaught of mounted men—of cowmen, charging on them with guns chopping.

Johnny whipped his own guns level, meeting that retreat as it surged toward him. Linden's guns were talking beside him. Together, they split the retreat—scattered it—cut it apart. Haslam's men lost all semblance of ordered fighting now, dividing into separate units, running, driven like sheep before yelling riders.

JOHNNY paused, thumbing fresh shells into his guns during a lull in the fighting. Linden had left him, running out into the general confusion. A man on horseback charged Johnny, saw the white rag at his elbow, and wheeled, shouting. A man on foot ran past him, hardly more than a shadow in the smoke-thick dawn—but it was a shape that Johnny knew well and had been hunting!

It was Haslam!

Johnny lunged forward, seeing the shadow dart into the house through a back doorway. The house itself was thick with smoke now, but the man ahead of Johnny used it only as a passage—a safer way through the outdoor bedlam. He was heading, Johnny knew, for the horses he expected to find waiting at the front of the building.

Johnny's eyes were stinging as he came out of the smoke-filled hallway onto the porch at the front of the house, but he saw that Haslam was already mounted. Johnny's gun spoke once at that flitting target, but it was a futile gesture. He knew that, and was already running, snatching up a trailing bridle rein as he lunged for the saddle. The strange horse pitched once, then lunged forward as Johnny's heels jarred him.

Haslam headed townward. It was a short ride and a swift one. The town was awake, roused by the night's excitement. Johnny saw lights in the windows, saw men moving in the streets; men who turned to stare as Haslam sped past them.

They turned to stare at Johnny, too. Bewildered, all of them, not sure which man was friend, which enemy. And no wonder! Nobody had been sure who he could trust, in this country, since John Patton had hit it! From now on, it would be different, they hoped.

Haslam had stopped now, in front of the Grizzly. The Grizzly Bar. A pretty pun, but Haslam could have picked a place he'd have liked better, Johnny thought fleetingly, as he flung down out of the saddle. The last two times he'd been here had

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been mighty unlucky.

A gun stabbed at Johnny as he went, fast, through the doors into the barroom. He had a glimpse of men diving for cover. Then he saw Haslam standing in the door through which Johnny had gone earlier in the evening to see Newcomb. Haslam held a suitcase in his left hand. In his right, a smoking gun chopped downward even as Johnny glimpsed him.

The slug hit Johnny like a mule's kick in the left shoulder. It spun him, but he made his right gun obey him. He fired once—and saw Haslam stagger. He thumbed the hammer back and fired again, deliberately. This was no time, he thought, to take chances!

Haslam coughed. He bent forward slowly, like a man bowing. But that slow bow carried him all the way forward. His knees broke under him and he pitched forward, the suitcase beside him.

Johnny looked around the room meaningly. "If I've hurt anybody's feelin's," he drawled, "I reckon I'm still able to argue!" And then he waited, his back to the wall, his right gun covering the men before him.

HE was still there, still holding that gun level, when Sheriff Meeker reached him; Meeker and Cass Linden and Dave Cody—and Wright! Cody and Wright walking together!

"I didn't know, y'see," Johnny mumbled, "whether these gents"—he tipped his head toward the men before him—"whether these gents would be sore at me or not—for killin' Haslam. So I figured to keep 'em covered—"

"You can stop keepin' 'em covered now," Meeker said gently. "The war's over."

"There's some stuff in that suitcase," Johnny said slowly. "I watched him pack it. Money—from the stage hold-up, I reckon—"

Then there was another figure in the haze before him—a girl's figure. It was coming nearer. Johnny said slowly: "Beth, there's a question I want to ask you, some day. Can't ask it now. I've got a . . . a sort of debt to pay, first. It'll take me a few years to pay it. If things go right, and Cass, maybe, asks 'em to go light on me—"

Cass Linden stood beside Beth now, and he was smiling. The old Scotchman's face was twisted and his eyes seemed to be troubling him a little. He said gruffly: "You're talkin' crazy, laddie! A debt? What sort o' debt would you be owin'—except maybe to the doctor that'll be patchin' you up as good as new if you'll stop talkin'?"

"Why, Cass, you know—what I mean! You ain't forgot who I am, have you? Remember me? The Neuces Kid—five hundred dollars' reward—"

"There's a reward on Flash Haslam, too, and a big one! And there's another on Newcomb, not to mention smaller bounties on maybe a dozen more o' the scoundrels Haslam had around him! When you collect for Haslam and Newcomb, ye can pay me yer own head tax, if ye've a mind to. But as fer the man ye was namin'—the Neuces Kid—"

Linden shrugged heavily. He was looking at Beth Afton now, and his smile was kindly. "The Neuces Kid was killed, pore feller! Shot fair in the throat up there at the Hashknife. I seen it happen. The man ye've got yer arms around, young lady, is Johnny Hardin—and a bonnie lad he is!"

THE END.

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GUNSMOKE THANKSGIVING

BY HARRY F. OLMSTED

THE Weasel came back to Beaver Meadow along about mid-afternoon that chill November day. He drew rein on the ridge overlooking the small, saucerlike valley and ran his chill gray eyes across the flat and into the fringe of pines circling it. The day was Thanksgiving, but never in his life had the Thanksgiving spirit been farther from this man hunter. Ill humor rode with him and he wrestled with the bitterness of one who has come to doubt everything and everybody. His pack horse edged up to nip playfully at his leg, and he expressed his annoyance by growling and driving the beast off with a kick.

The meadow seemed unchanged. The same frosted grass lay lush on the meadow floor. The same winding stream, with skift ice in the bays. The same stunted quaking aspens in their fiery fall habiliments. A herd of deer, feeding at the edge of timber, looked exactly like those which had fed there fifteen years ago. And the cabin—it, too, was there, though life had patently been cruel to it. The door sagged in its opening, and half of the roof had caved in. And the two trees that were so significant to his return, they were there. Not saplings now, as then, but spreading box elders, thick-boled and full-branched. Bared of greenery, it seemed to the Weasel that they, too, looked grizzled, weathered and a bit weary. The years are cruel.

Slowly the lawman rode down onto the floor of the meadow, his eyes busy. Already the chill of approaching evening was in the air. Thanksgiving Day was waning and one glance told him there were no humans here. Why should there be? Pinto and Upsie would not keep this rendezvous. For long ago those two, or one of them, would have returned for the thing they had left here to insure their reunion, which each of them had sworn with youthful fervor would not take place until fifteen years had elapsed.

The Weasel unsaddled, inspected the cabin, and finding the interior of the old cabin inhospitable, elected to camp in the open. For an hour he was busy. He picketed his ponies, cut boughs for his bed, piled stones into a neat fireplace and fetched a pail of water from the creek. The last sun ray left the meadow and the chill struck down. The Weasel gathered wood, built a fire and put on coffee to boil. Sprawled there before the blaze, he let his mind turn back to those carefree days when he and Pinto Travers and Upsie Downs punched cattle for the XSX, and to that particular day when they had ridden into this meadow to tally long-ears and had made their startling discovery.

First, it had been the skeleton of the horse, with the rope tied to the hitch post, the weathered saddle resting on the warped hide and whitened bones. Next, it had been the skeleton of the man, under blankets in one of the cabin bunks. And last, and most important, the golden coins—eagles and double eagles—in the pockets of that saddle. One hundred and twenty pounds of them—thirty thousand dollars!

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WITH a swift recurrence of the fear they all had felt that Thanksgiving Day so long ago, the Weasel recalled how they had buried the treasure, placing it in a rusty powder can topped with a stove lid, and covering it in a quickly dug hole yonder. Fifteen paces from each of the box elders, measured northward. Fifteen inches deep. Hiding it from the eyes of man for fifteen years. Easy to remember, those figures. Fear had prompted them to their strange pact. Fear of being connected with the theft of this coin. Fear of the law prying into the death of the man whom they had carefully buried with his saddle and the bones of his horse. And fear that the money would be lost to them if they tried to spend it too quickly, before the hue and cry of its loss had died. And so they had taken their strange oath.

The Weasel glanced toward the spot where the gold had been hidden, a sardonic expression on his face. The treasure wasn't there; that he knew. Pinto and Upsie had come back to dig it up; of that he was certain. For Pinto and Upsie, those two rollicking saddlemates of his youth, were Pete Travers and Bill Downs, killers, thieves, outlaws. He had hunted them for five years. And his failure to land them was the only black mark on his substantial record as a man hunter. Crooks. Men whose word wasn't worth a plugged dime.

"Fool trick comin' here," he said

After fifteen years the Weasel returned to Beaver Meadow as he'd sworn he would. But he'd given his word to two crooks and the meeting place was sinister with hidden treachery.

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aloud. "Can't savvy why I took time to keep my word to a couple of crooks who busted theirs years ago. Cold, lonely night and trouble for my pains."

But he knew the answer, despite his protestations. He had come here only to put a period to a truth derived from his own experience. The truth that there is no justification for man's faith in man. Looking back over his long career as a lawman, the Weasel failed to find one argument to disprove his cynicism. Man is a faithless animal.

Yet, for all that, the lawman was straining his ears for sounds as he ate his lonely supper. Deep inside him was a consuming hunger for the food that would dispel, once and for all, a doubt that had become habitual.

Dusk crept in. Night came with its star-studded, moonless sky. The Weasel sat there feeding the fire, his head bent dejectedly. He dozed, wakening with a start as one of his ponies neighed shrilly. From the ridge came an equine answer, and the lawman heard the two horses coming down the slope. His heart beat with an excitement he hadn't known for years, not even when facing the death of smoking guns. And the firelight, splashing across his strained, set face, picked up the beginnings of a smile.

A wild "*haloo-o-o-oo!*" rang out through the night, and the Weasel answered. And then there were the hoofbeats of only one horse. The lawman knew a rider had paused out there in the blackness, perhaps with a gun palmed. That, he thought, would be Upsie Downs, squat, bushy-haired Upsie with the keen, calculating brain and the devilish efficiency. Never a chance would Upsie take until he had scouted the lay and weighed all the angles.

The firelight picked up the rider, who drew rein and came toward the camp with a marked limp. Two glances locked and never shifted until the new arrival stood before the lawman. Their hands met and clasped. Neither spoke until he had digested the effect of the years upon the other. Then:

"Yes, you're John Redfern all right," said the newcomer. "Same carcass of rawhide an' barb wire. Same lean face an' eagle eyes. Few more wrinkles an' a dash of gray in the old scalplock. You ain't changed much."

"Nor you, Pinto," murmured the Weasel, turning to the coffeepot to hide the reflection of the lie. For this was not the Pinto he had known. That one had been lean and willowy as a whip, ever laughing, even when he loosed the temper as fiery as his hair. This man was inclining toward flesh and his head, when he cast aside his hat, was totally bald. Reddish skin hung in folds about his neck, as if grown to accommodate flesh worn away by privation and hard riding. Freckles had given way to gorged veins. The marks of hard living were on him, and when he laughed, it was only a caricature of the mirth that had once been his.

PINTO had not eaten, so the Weasel fed him. Silence held them both while he ate, yet always their eyes were busy, appraising, comparing. Pinto Travers had just finished when the Weasal had to do it all over again. For hoofbeats were disturbing the night out there and a hail was rifling through the gloom. Upsie Downs lit off his horse and came to the fire, his spur rowels chiming as his stocky legs pounded the ground.

"Pinto," he cried, and crossed palms with the bald-headed man. "Sure good to see you after all these

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years. Doggone, you ain't changed much. An' you, John Redfern—" He took the hand of the cold-faced lawman, staring. "You've changed less'n any of us."

"Thanks, Upsie," said the Weasel. "I wish I could say I felt like I did the last time we met here. Set, while I fry you some bacon."

While Upsie Downs ate, the Weasel studied him. As he saw it, Upsie had changed least of the three of them. The same quiet, scornful smile, keen, restless eyes and great shock of wild hair, untouched with gray. His face was hard, bitter, there in the firelight, his bloodshot eyes red as blazing brands, his mouth a friendless gash. He drained his cup, laid his plate on the stones and wiped his mouth on the back of his hairy hand. The Weasel noticed his glance striking nervously out toward the twin box elders, as though he had just felt a twinge of conscience.

"Well," he said, with forced heartiness. "You know what we're here for, boys. What we waitin' for?"

"I thought it might be kind of fitting," said the Weasel quietly, "if we sort of swapped experiences. Fifteen years is a long time. A lot of water has gone under the bridge since then, boys, and it ought to be good listening. Pinto, what's life done to you since we parted company?"

Bleakness came into the bald man's pale eyes. "Life!" He spoke the word bitterly. "From the first, it's had me measured for a hole in the sand, John. When we quit the XSX, I rode down into the Cedar Basin country. Took up a quarter section of land an' got a few cows—"

"How?" broke in the Weasel.

Pinto flung him a quick glance. "Never mind how. I figgered to start like all the big fellers started, an' did. World of elbow room there then; grass was good, plenty water an' beef held high. I done well. In five years I was turnin' off fifty yearling beefs a year, some runnin' close to a thousand pounds. Then the railroad come through. I had never made my proof; never even thought about it until an agent of the railroad people came up an' told me I was on their land. I kicked him off the place an' went down to the land office. There I found the railroad had contested my filing on the ground that my house was over the line—on another man's quarter section. It proved to be right; I lost the case an' my outfit with it. That was the end of the Pinto Travers you used to know."

"I've seen you laugh off other tough breaks," the Weasel observed quietly.

"I reckon I really never laughed again," said Pete Travers. "You see, I was about to marry a gal, daughter of a big cowman down yonder. When it turned out I had no prospects he stood between us, an' I didn't blame him. So I set forth to take from the railroad what they had took from me. I've never let up on 'em. I've stopped two of their trains an' took off plenty money. But I couldn't hold onto it. Easy come, easy go. An' it takes money when you're always runnin' from the law." His eyes, half lidded, were on the Weasel, who stared away into the darkness.

"Go on, Pinto. That put you on the dodge. What did you do?"

"Went from bad to worse," confessed Travers miserably. "Once you get outside the law, there's no stoppin'. It's sorta kill or be killed. Finally I taken a pardner an' he was a good one. We shot our way out of a lot of jams, livin' by the gun an' dodgin' bullets with our names wrote on 'em. Last five years it's been hell. We made the mistake of stoppin' a

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stage that carried U. S. mail. Never bothered the pouches, but it set a human bloodhound on our trails. For five years he's kept after us, never showin' himself but always findin' ways of plantin' word he's still on the hunt." There was a brooding bitterness in his eyes. "It was worse than hard runnin' with bullets whisperin' around our ears. Livin' like coyotes, scairt of our shadows, not darin' to trust any man for nothin'. It's got me whipped, boys. I've had enough."

"You mean you're giving yourself up?" The Weasel leaned toward him, his eyes blazing strangely. "That ain't like you, Pinto."

"I'm ready to swallow a slug an' cash my chips," corrected Pinto, and his hand was very near his gun. "I've had enough. But let's call that quits for me. What you bin doin', John?"

"It's a long story, boys," said the lawman morosely. "And it'll take a long time in the tellin'. Suppose we hear from Upsie first."

WON'T take long to tell mine," muttered Downs. "When I left the XSX, I got me a spot in a saloon, down Flatwillow way. You fellers know I allus had a way with cards, an' I tried to cash in on it. Did, too, until I got into it with a crooked tinhorn who come there a-purpose to clean me. I knew what the play was an' rigged me a big hold-out to take him. You know, a cold deck. He got wise an' pulled a gun on me. I killed him. After that it was run, run, run, with never a minute's rest. Been better, maybe, if he'd killed me; I've not had a bit of luck since that day."

Silence fell, and John Redfern's voice struck into it. "Man stakes his life on the wheel of time, boys. And death is his take, luck or no."

Upsie Downs nodded. "Like Pinto, I soon found that when a man dodges the law he's hard put to keep alive. It takes more outlaw business to keep food in the belly and good horseflesh under a man. One thing led to another, mostly petty larceny. Then I taken a pardner an' went after bigger game. Banks, trains, stages an' big rustlin' deals. Got my hands on lots of money, but what good did it do me? None. I couldn't settle down to nothin' steady so I could enjoy it. Nothin' to do but gamble an' run. It all went over a gambling board. I'd even lost my luck with cards." He threw his cigarette end into the fire and sighed. "If only a man could turn back the pages of his life like a book. I'd sure play the game different. But I can't do that no more than I can shake the Weasel, a U. S. marshal that's after me. Now what about you, John? What've you been doin'?"

The lawman took a long drag at his cigarette. "I chose the other side, boys," he began. "Maybe I was lucky, maybe not. A lawman is like an outlaw in some ways. Denied a wife's smile, the warm comfort of a hearth fire and children to brighten his old age. After we split up I caught on with old Sheriff Hazzard, up Glasgow way. When he died I stood for sheriff an' served one term. Politics changed an' I was out. Went to guidin' hunting parties through the Wind River Range. That's where I met a young New Yorker, feller who owned a cow-outfit in Dakota. He wanted a sheep an' I saw that he got one. He was sure all man an' a comer. He had some influence in Washington and it was through him that I was appointed deputy U. S. marshal, out of Cheyenne."

He talked on and on, recounting dangerous experiences that held his

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two listeners silent and awed. He pictured the development of a trusting youngster into a cynical man hunter who believed nothing until it was a proven fact. Two hours after he started, he was winding up.

"—last five years I've been following the trail of a couple of bad actors. Men who've done about everything there is that's lawless and bad. Slick and sly as dog foxes, they've been. Times I've been close to them, but never close enough. Times I've cursed them for making a monkey out of me. Again I've applauded the clever way they blot their trail." His smile was humorless, a mere contraction of the lips. "Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever catch up with them two rascals."

"You ain't making it no easier on yourself, taking time out to come up here," Pinto Travers said stiffly. "Or —are you?"

Silence spread and the Weasel's calm eyes struck across the fire at him. "Oh, you mean today? This is a gun holiday, boys. A holiday set fifteen years ago. Couldn't overlook that, could I? Anyway, I lost the trail back yonder a ways. Hadn't any choice—much."

"Well"—Upsie Downs came to his feet, his expression suddenly grim—"we met here for a purpose. Let's get at it."

"Yeah," chimed in Pinto. "Le's go dig up that gold. Been many a time I was tempted to come here an' get it, but somehow couldn't bring myself to do it, unless you two were here to help."

The Weasel watched them sardonically. Upsie Downs had always been a stiff bluffer—at poker. And Pinto was a genius at whipsawing a pilgrim, with a partner. They were running their bluff all the way through. The lawman came to his feet, shifting his gun belt. Maybe this pair wouldn't observe a gun holiday. When the hole proved to be empty, that might be their cue to jump him. He wondered.

Together, each man keeping his elbow space, they moved away from the fire. Pinto reached into the crotch of one of the two box elders and gave a cry.

"Still here!" he yelled with almost boyish excitement. "Right where we put it fifteen years ago." He had a rusty shovel in his hands. "Something kinda sacred about it, eh, boys? Does something to a feller."

They took turns stepping out the distances from the two trees. Their respective measurements formed the points of a small triangle. Pinto laid his weight on the digging tool, lifted out loam. His third entry gave back the muted ring of steel on iron. The Weasel moved close, surprised. Upsie knelt, murmuring curses. Pinto Travers' big red hands went into the hole. "It . . . it's here!" he yelped, like a man who has verified the impossible. "What you know about that?"

Grunting, he lifted out the heavy powder can, tipped off the rusty stove lid. The glint of golden coins struck from the dark interior. The three flashed covert glances at one another. Then, without words, they were moving back to the fire, Pinto stumbling under a hundred-and-twenty-pound burden. The Weasel darted ahead to spread out a blanket. The discovery had done something to him. He didn't yet more than half believe the gold was in that can. Why should it be?

But all his doubts fled when Pinto dumped the contents onto the blanket. Fifteen hundred twenty-dollar gold pieces. For a long time they hunkered there, staring at it in silence. Pinto was first to speak.

"Ain't it beautiful? By jigger, it's the purtiest thing I ever looked at."

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"An' deadliest stuff in the world," moralized Upsie Downs, in a flat, dead voice. "Drives men to hell; sets brother against brother an' makes devils out of saints."

"Can't live decent without it," the Weasel agreed, "or with it. Food and poison all in the same dose."

"Ever learn anything about this dinero, John?" asked Pinto. "Or the gent who died in the cabin, yonder? Looks like if anybody could find out, you would."

THE Weasel nodded. "Yes, I found out about it. Thirty thousand ain't horse hay, so it was easy, once I started. The dead man was one Tom Hildreth, who was riding to buy an outfit up Copper Creek way. He was a sick man when he left his place to start his ride. Likely he got worse, crawled in here and died and his pony starved to death. I checked carefully. He left no kin. Count it out in three piles, Pinto."

Pinto did, dealing from the golden deck until each man had a pile of five hundred double eagles before him. When it was done, Pinto sank his fingers into his, dropping them carelessly into his various pockets, spilling them onto the blanket and letting one coin roll away unheeded. This, thought the Weasel, was like the old Pinto. Reckless, uncaring, his mind wontedly galloping miles ahead of where he happened to be at the moment.

Upsie Downs, however spread out a piece of heavy wrapping paper he took from his saddle, carefully rolled twenty-five little cylinders, each containing four hundred dollars, and crimping the ends as neatly as a bank clerk might have done. These he placed in his saddle pocket, working with a concentration that quite excluded the other two men. And the Weasel reflected that a man of such meticulous detail would do things to a trail that could easily make it almost impossible to follow.

When it was finished, and not until then, did the two outlaws raise their eyes to the lawman. In their glances were unvoiced questions.

"That's that," said John Redfern. "Want to meet here again, boys? Say fifteen years from now."

Pinto shook his head. "Nope," he said decisively. "I'm quittin' the country. I've had enough. I'll never find a place I love like this Montana country, but it's got no love for me. So it's my move. I'm headin' for the Argentine, by the first boat."

"And you, Upsie?" asked the lawman.

The stocky, efficient man smiled thinly. "I don't know what's around here for me—now. Unless it's a gallows tree, or a furnished room in the Big House, without runnin' water. Pinto here never was any good without me, so I reckon I'll tag along with him."

"Ain't none of us any good without the other," said Pinto eagerly. "John, how about throwin' your badge away an' comin' along. We can start a spread down there, tie onto a nice little black-eyed señorita apiece an'—"

John Redfern came up. "Wait a minute," he said, and went out into the darkness to saddle his horse. He came riding back to find them staring at him, quizzically, almost hopefully, he thought. "Boys," he said, "I just happened to think what might have happened to that trail I was follerin'. Come big daylight I wanta be back there. I'll pick it up an' foller it as long as there's tracks. It's been nice seein' you again an' best of luck to you."

His hand came out to shake with

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them. Then he was loping away into the night. He was a hundred yards away when Upsie's voice came after him. "Hey—John! Wait! You forgot your cut of the mazuma."

Only a diminishing beat of hoofs answered him. John Redfern had to be sure that the fierce satisfaction warming him was the real thing.

TWO days later, the Weasel came riding back into Beaver Meadow, with much the same feeling of excitement as he had experienced before. But for quite a different reason. First, he saw his pack horse grazing down by the creek. Then, when he had dismounted by the cabin, he saw something that lit a warm and honest smile on his rugged face. There was such a thing as faith in a man after all. He had left the pack horse and his outfit for the use of the two outlaws, in case they needed it. He had left the money purposely, challenging the strange trust that had held two desperate men from that treasure store until the appointed day. Now the money was there on the blanket, untouched. The Weasel even found the coin Pinto had carelessly overlooked. Yes, there was honor among men, no matter how far down the slide they had slipped.

John Redfern had picked up the trail again, had followed it to Beaver Meadow. Now he followed it out, just as he had promised, knowing he would never catch them, and glad in the thought. And he had even greater reason than before to admire the efficiency of Upsie Downs. That trail was a masterpiece of deception. Not once, but a number of times, the sign doubled back, lost itself. And each time he picked it up through some carelessness of Pinto's. Once it was the butt of a cigarette habitually rolled by the bald-headed man in the Mexican fashion. Once it was a twenty-dollar gold piece, lost from one of Pinto's weighted pockets. First one thing, then another. But always it was Upsie chilling the trail, Pinto warming it up.

Finally it was a cattle drive that blotted the trail—forever. After waiting out a night of storm, the Weasel came upon a straggled herd, the cattle weary and blown, as if from a night of running. Weary-eyed cowboys stood by the battered chuck wagon while two of the crew patted two grave mounds into shape.

"Your boys?" the Weasel asked of the foreman.

The man shook his head. "No," he said. "The herd broke last night in the storm. We found these two strangers this morning, trampled to death. Looks like the runnin' herd caught 'em while they slept."

The Weasel nodded, glanced around at the staring cowboys. For the most part they kept their hands on their bulging, sagging pockets. But one absently shuffled a stack of twenty-dollar coins in his hands. That was proof enough. Pinto and Upsie were gone forever. Outlaw or marshal, every man hears the call and lays down his chips.

Without a word, the Weasel looked again at the two graves, raised his hand in salute, and reined about, setting his course for far Cheyenne. Once the disgrace and humiliation of returning empty-handed without the men he sought would have bowed his spirit. But he whistled now as he rode to report his failure. It had taken a gun holiday, the aftermath of a long-awaited tryst, to restore his vanished faith in his fellow man. That was priceless.

THE END.

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"Come on down to the Golden Slipper, sheriff!" the puncher yelled. "A big Swede is wrecking the joint!"

SIX-GUN SAGA

BY JOHN COLOHAN

THIS Swede—this Sven Jorgenson—was something special. He'd been working on the Vulcan tram line, deep in the La Salles. With six months' pay in a pair of patched overalls he'd rolled the blankets and come into San Hernando atop a load of ore. A blue-eyed giant of a man he was, an ax handle wide across the shoulders, with a trusting smile and the simple faith of a child. These latter qualities have never been considered assets in San Hernando.

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Breaking the mirror in the Golden Slipper was an accident, although, afterward, the Swede couldn't remember clearly how the argument had started. He had been backed up against the bar, full of the milk of human kindness and singing lustily, when a stranger in leather pants objected to the song and seconded the objection with a beer mug aimed at the singer's head. The Swede fended off the flying missile easily, heard it crash somewhere behind him, and was just cranking up for a second chorus when Monte Joiner came out from behind the bar.

"I'll teach you to break a mirror in my place," Joiner said.

Monte Joiner was a small man with a pair of dead eyes in a pasty, expressionless face. He owned a half interest in the Golden Slipper, owned also a reputation for being a dangerous man in a jam. He stood balanced on his toes, shoving a Colt .45 deep into the Swede's midsection.

"I'll teach you to break a mirror in my place," Joiner repeated softly. "You pay for that glass here and now, my friend."

Sven Jorgenson looked down at the gun wonderingly. He looked at the big mirror behind the bar and saw the long lines radiating outward in a web from the spot where the beer mug had struck a corner of the glass. He shook his head uncomprehendingly.

"The mirror I do not break," he said simply. "Me, I am Sven Yorgenson. I pay my bills. The money I have in my pocket, but I do not break the mirror. So—"

"So!" said Joiner, and thumbed gun hammer back. With the gun boring into Jorgenson, with death at his fingertips, the saloonman began to curse the Swede in a soft and deadly monotone. It wasn't a pleasant thing to see, with the big man held helpless under the gun. The tirade of abuse went on and on, with the saloon very quiet, with not a sound lifting above Joiner's husky voice. The smile went away from the Swede's face and slowly his mild blue eyes congealed into ice.

LATER, there was some difference of opinion over what actually occurred. On one fact the onlookers were agreed: This big Sven Jorgenson could move around. Suddenly, with amazing speed, he slapped at Joiner's gun, pawing the gun aside as it exploded. The slug crashed harmlessly into the bar. The Swede had one big hand wrapped around the barrel and he twisted the weapon out of Joiner's grasp as he might have taken it from a child. He flung the gun away contemptuously.

He looked at Joiner curiously. "You will teach Sven Yorgenson how to break a mirror?" he said.

He grabbed the pasty-faced saloon man then, grabbed him by the neck and the slack of the pants and swung him high overhead. A moment he held him there, poised and wriggling, and then sent him hurtling through air like a flying projectile. Across the bar went Monte Joiner, across the open space behind until his body crashed into the big mirror with force sufficient to shake the very building walls. There was a shower of broken glass and tumbling bottles as Joiner landed in a heap behind the bar.

The big Swede was as pleased as a child. "By yumping yiminee!" he said. "Nobody haf to teach Sven Yorgenson how to break a mirror."

And then the storm broke around his head. Con Hiser, the second

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half of the Golden Slipper partnership, came over the bar in a single panther leap. Hiser was a black-browed, black-mustached man thickly and powerfully built. A head shorter than Sven Jorgenson, he carried a bung starter in one hand to make up the difference. The cowpuncher whose thrown mug had precipitated the argument joined in the mêlée, flinging himself at the big Scandinavian in a headlong dive. Friends rushed to the cowpuncher's assistance. Sven Jorgenson was a stranger and they meant to take him in.

In an instant they were all locked in furious embrace. Con Hiser smashed the Swede over the head with the bung starter. The blue eyes blinked but the blond giant did not waver and the happy smile still sat upon his lips. Men were all over him, striking at his face, clutching at his arms, kicking at his legs. He brushed them off like flies. He clubbed a fist in a flailing blow that knocked Hiser to the floor. He shoved another of his assailants aside. It was no more than a push, but it sent the attacker reeling across the room to crash against the barroom wall.

In the end they bore him down by the sheer weight of numbers. Con Hiser, back on his feet, struck again with the bung starter and knocked the Swede to his knees. They piled over him like wolves on a hamstrung bull, and Jorgenson was fighting back with feet and flailing fists when a harsh voice cut through the tumult of the battle. A voice that said: "Get back! Get back! I'll take care of that gent!"

Up to now, despite the odds against him, big Sven Jorgenson had been enjoying the fight. It was just another rough-house battle, the kind of battle he had been fighting ever since he could remember and then, quite suddenly, it was something else. It was pasty-faced Monte Joiner, on his feet again, telling the others to get out of the way. It was Monte Joiner, with blood running down his lean face from a cut across the forehead; Monte Joiner, who had found another gun somewhere, leaning out across the bar with death in his snaky eyes.

"Get back!" Joiner repeated, in his oddly husky voice. "I'll take care of the squarehead."

This was something else. This was death, and big Sven Jorgenson knew it. The others had fallen away from him and he was on his knees on the floor, looking up at Joiner's pale, vindictive face. The saloon man was shoved out over the bar, lining gun sights deliberately, taking his time. The gun was dropping . . . dropping—

AND then a man's body stood between Sven Jorgenson and the gun; and how the man got there Jorgenson didn't know. He was a smallish man in Levis and vest and flannel shirt. He had a sandy mustache above a steel-trap jaw, and the Swede could see the bright badge shining on his vest.

"Well," the little man with the badge was murmuring, "what happens? What goes on?"

This was the law. Sven Jorgenson pushed ponderously to his feet. He smiled ingratiatingly. "We was yust romping," he explained. "Me and the boys here—"

"Yust romping!" said Con Hiser bitterly. "Listen, McNaught! This big squarehead tried to wreck the place! He threw Monte through the back-bar mirror—damn near threw him through the wall—" The

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saloonkeeper's voice broke off and he gestured helplessly at the desolation behind the bar. "Yust romping!" he said.

Sheriff Jim McNaught rubbed the heel of his hand across his jaw. "Tell it from the beginning," he said.

When it was told the little sheriff

looked at big Sven Jorgenson. "I'll have to take you to jail," he said. "Disturbing the peace, and such like. You'll get your trial tomorrow."

Jorgenson nodded placidly. Jail was all right. He had been in jail before, and he had an idea that just now it might be the safest spot he could find in San Hernando. They went down wooden sidewalks together, the big Swede and the lawman, and into a gloomy stone building, and there the sheriff locked Jorgenson in a cell.

"You'll be O. K. here," the little lawman told him. "I'll bring up your supper pretty soon."

He turned to go. "Yust a minute, please," said Jorgenson. And, when the lawman stopped: "You are one all-right sheriff. When you step in front of that gun yust now you save Sven Yorgenson's hide. Sven Yorgenson, he don't forget nothing like that."

The supper came up later. It was a good meal and Jorgenson enjoyed it thoroughly, but when he had shoved the tray aside he began to prowl restlessly within the narrow limits of his cell. He was an outdoor man, unused to long confinement of any sort, and the thought of spending time in a place like this was appalling. There was a single small window in the cell, lined with iron bars, and beyond the bars the Swede could see only a vacant lot filled with accumulated trash. The sun was down and it was growing dark within the jail.

Tentatively Jorgenson gripped an iron bar and tugged at it strongly. The iron seemed to give slightly under the pull. The Swede braced a knee against the wall and pulled with both hands, and presently he had managed to bend a bow in the iron bar. With powerful hands he twisted the bar around and around until one end had been loosened in its stone anchorage, and after that it was only a matter of seconds until he had jerked the bar free of the stone.

The second bar came easier, for the Swede used the first one as a lever. A third bar followed the second in rapid order, a fourth followed the third, and sometime around nine o'clock that night Sven Jorgenson hoisted his big frame through the opening he had made and in velvet darkness dropped into the vacant lot behind the San Hernando jail.

They missed Jorgenson at breakfast time. Sheriff Jim McNaught had brought up a tray of food, to discover that his jail was empty,

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that his prisoner had departed in the night. The sheriff called Pete Bagby, the lanky deputy.

"Look at this," said the little lawman mournfully. "That Scandinavian gorilla wrecked the Golden Slipper—now he's gone and wrecked our jail. A gent like that ain't safe to have around, even behind bars."

He surveyed the damage sorrowfully. "This is the devil of a time for it to happen," he said. "Three days before election."

Bagby spoke up loyally. "You got no call to worry about election, Jim. You'll win hands down."

"You could be wrong," said Sheriff McNaught briefly. He frowned. "I'll tell you one thing, Pete—we got to land that jasper back behind the bars. It's your job. Grab yourself a handful of horse—and don't come back without the Swede."

SVEN JORGENSON walked all night. Sometime before noon on the following day, some thirty odd miles beyond San Hernando, he pulled up at Lige Bussey's cabin at the foot of Clear Creek to ask if he might buy a meal. Mrs. Bussey met him at the door; she told him that while he couldn't buy anything she would feel honored if he would stay for dinner with the family.

A couple of small children were playing on the pocket handkerchief of lawn before the cabin, and Lige Bussey came in from the direction of the corral. A lank and gloomy scarecrow of a man, he shook hands with Jorgenson and made him welcome, and shortly thereafter they sat down around a well-filled table. And they had finished the meal when Mrs. Bussey, fluttering between dining room and kitchen, stopped for a moment behind her husband's chair to speak in worried tones.

"Some men are riding up," she said. "Skull men, I think. Abe Moss is one of them."

"Moss!" said Lige Bussey. Dejection seemed to settle him deeper in his chair. A long moment he sat still, staring at the table, before he shoved his chair back and pushed to his feet. "I'll see what they want."

He went outside. Through the open door Jorgenson saw the arrival of the riders, and heard the curt exchange of greeting between them and Bussey. It looked a little bit like trouble to the Swede, who was pretty well acquainted with trouble, and he got up and went outside to take his place beside his host.

There were quite a lot of riders in the bunch. Most of them were still slouched in saddle, but one man had swung down from his horse and was standing facing Bussey. He was a huge man, bull-shouldered and powerfully built, with a dark-skinned, surly face. He was rolling a cigarette between thick fingers and talking to Bussey at the same time.

"This election, now," he was saying. "How do you stand on the election, Bussey? On the sheriff's job, for example?"

It sounded like small talk, a bit of casual conversation, but Jorgenson knew there was more to it than that. He could sense the latent hostility between these strangers and Lige Bussey; he could see the hesitation in the latter's face.

Bussey spoke slowly, carefully. "Jim McNaught's a good man, he's been a good sheriff. I figger—"

"McNaught," said the dark-faced man curtly, "ain't worth a damn. Curt Fenton is the gent for the job. We're out electioneering for Curt."

He finished the cigarette, touched a match to it. "This is under the rose, Bussey," he said. "Mebbe you

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better just keep away from the polls this year. Mebbe you better not vote at all."

Lige Bussey was staring at him. "You mean—"

"Sure," said the dark-faced man. "A little outfit like yours ain't got no business being on the wrong side this year. Too many things might happen to you. Your house might burn down, mebbe. Something like that. You better take my advice and let your vote slide. See what I mean?"

"I see what you mean," Lige Bussey said slowly.

The dark-faced man turned his attention on Sven Jorgenson. He regarded the big Swede thoughtfully. "How about you, brother?" he asked softly. "What do you think of Jim McNaught as a sheriff?"

"McNaught," said Jorgenson stoutly, "is a very good man. He is a very brave man. He is a fine sheriff."

"You think so?" inquired the dark-faced man.

WHAT happened then happened fast. Too fast for Jorgenson to follow the sequence of events. The dark-faced man's hand dropped, came up again, and Jorgenson saw the gleam of metal shining in the sunlight, and then the dark-faced man stepped in and smashed him full in the face with the barrel of the gun. Before Jorgenson could raise his hands the dark-faced man struck again, a crashing blow to the temple that knocked the big Scandinavian to his knees.

Jorgenson was on the ground. The dark-faced man, gun in hand, was looking down at him, a wicked grin on his face. "What do you think of McNaught now?" he asked.

"McNaught," said Sven Jorgenson stubbornly, "is a good man. He is a fine sheriff—"

He started to get up. The dark-faced man lashed out with the clubbed gun and knocked him back to his knees again.

"What about McNaught?" asked the dark-faced man.

Blood was running down Jorgenson's forehead into his eyes. He was beginning to get mad. He had the feeling that this was carrying politics too far. He got his legs under him and pushed upward.

"McNaught is a very good sheriff," he repeated doggedly. "He is a very brave sheriff."

He spread his arms wide and tried to close with the big gunman, but the blood was in his eyes so that he couldn't see very well, and the dark-faced man slipped away from him. Again the dark-faced man smashed him with the gun. The Swede couldn't seem to get away from the flashing gun. It struck him again and again, cruel blows that drove him backward, that beat him down at last into the ground.

Lige Bussey tried to stop it. His own gun was in the house, but he started forward anyhow. A hatchet-faced rider still in saddle spun his horse and turned a gun on the rancher. "Keep out of it," the rider said, and Bussey was forced to stand, sick and helpless, until the merciless beating was over.

Jorgenson got up once more, but this time he had no knowledge of what was happening. Pure reflex action and a fighting heart lifted him erect in one last, valiant effort. He stood there in the sunlight, blind and staggering and out on his feet; and very coolly and deliberately the dark-faced gunman knocked him down with the barrel of the gun. This time the Swede lay still.

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The big gunman looked down at him, looked at Lige Bussey. "That's what I mean, Bussey," he said curtly. "It ain't good luck to be a friend of Jim McNaught's this year."

He holstered his gun, swung into saddle. The party rode away. When they were gone Bussey and his wife carried Jorgenson to the porch. They washed his wounds and sponged blood from his face, and after a time the Swede shook his head and sat up on the porch. His bright blue eyes were troubled.

"That faller?" he asked wonderingly. "Who was he?"

Bussey's thin face tightened. "That was Abe Moss. He's foreman of the Skull. He's a tough hand."

"What was he mad about?" asked Jorgenson.

"He figured you for a friend of Sheriff Jim McNaught," said Bussey. "Election is day after tomorrow and the Skull is out to get McNaught. Half a dozen of the big outfits are out to beat him. They got riders out warning McNaught's friends to keep away from the polls on election day."

"McNaught is a good man," declared Jorgenson.

"Best sheriff this county ever had," Bussey agreed. "Only he won't take orders from the big outfits, which is why they're after his hide. They're liable to get it, too. Abe Moss and his crowd have just about got this country treed." He studied the Swede. "How you feel?"

Sven Jorgenson grinned cheerfully. "Yust fine. I got a good strong head."

Indeed, he seemed to be all right despite the beating he had taken, and, over the protests of Bussey and his wife, he departed within the hour. Bussey walked with him to the gate and shook hands. He told Jorgenson that some two miles farther on he would reach a railroad shipping-point and a crossroad store, and that the town of Indian Wells was some ten miles beyond. He offered to drive the Swede to Indian Wells but Jorgenson refused with thanks.

Half an hour later, trudging along a dusty road, Jorgenson topped a rise and saw a railroad locomotive shunting stock cars before a loading pen. Beyond the stockyards were a few houses and a single square log building divided in the center so that half of it was a general store, the other half a saloon. As the Swede reached this building a girl in Levis pulled her pony up before the hitch rack; she hesitated momentarily and then went into the store. With no hesitation at all Sven Jorgenson selected the saloon.

Inside the long, cool room a little man with a white spade beard had just started for the door. "Got a customer in the store," he told the Swede. "Be with you in a minute."

Jorgenson propped elbows on the mahogany and waited patiently. He

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was still waiting, five minutes later, when a group of horsemen swung down on the place in a rolling cloud of dust. The Swede glanced out through a dirty window in time to see big Abe Moss just stepping out of saddle.

THE rest is history in San Hernando County. And, as is the way with history, some parts of it are scarcely credible. Sven Jorgenson looked behind the bar and saw a double-barreled, sawed-off shotgun resting against the wall. He went around the bar and got the shotgun. There was another gun, a Colt single-action .44 on the cash register, and the Swede took this gun also. He dropped down out of sight behind the bar.

He was out of sight when the riders came tromping into the saloon. The place seemed empty, and big Abe Moss hammered on the bar.

"Hey!" Moss bellowed. "Fogarty! Hey, Fogarty!"

And then Sven Jorgenson came up before him like a jack-in-the-box. In one hand Jorgenson had a Colt six-gun, in the other a sawed-off shotgun, and on the Swede's battered face was a pleased and happy smile. The six-gun covered the crowd impartially, but the double-barreled shotgun was bearing exclusively on the broad expanse of Abe Moss' chest.

"This is yust fine," Jorgenson said cheerfully. "This time I t'ank she's different."

There were seven men in the crowd on the customer's side of the bar, and they were tough hands all. But the Swede had a queer gleam in his blue eyes. Moreover, he had a double-barreled shotgun in one hand; and even in the hands of a tyro a shotgun carries authority. Not a man spoke a word; not one tried for his gun. With the shotgun the Swede drove them across the room; he lined them up facing the wall with their hands in air; he lifted their guns from leather. He was humming a snatch of song under his breath as he worked down the row.

White-bearded Fogarty returned to his saloon in the midst of the operation. The old man's jaw sagged and he leaned against the door and watched proceedings with speechless amazement. Sven Jorgenson had collected a whole armload of guns and these he dropped behind the bar. Here, also, he discarded the six-gun he had borrowed. He kept the shotgun.

"By yumping yiminee!" Jorgenson said with satisfaction. "This time I t'ank she's different. We go outside."

They went outside. What Sven Jorgenson meant to do with the seven men he had captured must remain his secret, but it may be that he was merely rolling with events. At any rate, there happened to be an empty box car on the siding beyond the store, and toward the box car the big Swede herded his captive crew.

One by one he forced the prisoners to crawl into the box car, until only Abe Moss remained, and then, with the scattergun and some cheerfully garbled English he forced Moss to shut and lock the car door. He drove the Skull foreman around the car to make certain that the opposite door was also locked.

And then Sven Jorgenson laid the shotgun down across the ties and looked at big Abe Moss.

"I yust want to ask one question," said Jorgenson. "How you like Sheriff Jim McNaught?"

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Abe Moss stared at the Swede incredulously. He found his voice at last. "I don't like him worth a damn," he said.

Jorgenson smiled happily. "I t'ank he is one damn fine sheriff," he said.

He lowered his head. He spread his arms wide. He started toward Abe Moss.

IT was something to see and to remember, that fight. Abe Moss was quite a lot of man himself. Not as tall as the Swede, not as wide, he was yet two hundred pounds of solid bone and muscle. And he knew how to handle his fists with a vicious skill, knew how to take care of himself in the clutch.

So, it developed, did the Swede, after a fashion of his own. The Swede had learned his trade in a hundred brawls in saloons, in railroad gangs, in logging camps in the odd corners of the world. He had one style, which was to slug and keep on slugging until something dropped, and this was the way he fought.

The Swede walked into Abe Moss with both fists swinging like pistons, and Abe Moss met him with straight punches that smashed the Swede's mouth and cut his face and drove his head back on the cushioned muscles of his shoulders. But Abe Moss tried at last a dynamite-laden right swing, and that was a mistake, for the Swede went under the punch and came up with a savage short-arm jolt that clipped the Skull man under the jaw and left him sprawled flat on his back.

Abe Moss sat up. For a moment he sat on the ground, still unhurt, his eyes blinking in sheer amazement. He leaped erect, covering fast, lashing out with left and right as the Swede charged in, but that one smashing blow had taken something from Moss and he never got it back. After that he fought cautiously and well, dancing around the Swede, stabbing out with a long left hand and cutting his opponent's face with solid, jolting blows, slipping away from the other man's bull-like rushes. But the Swede kept coming on.

This was the pattern of the fight. The Swede would take a dozen blows, walking in, but when he closed with Moss he seemed to tear the Skull man apart with savage body blows. Abe Moss would twist and duck and fight his way clear, and then the procedure would be repeated once again. Sven Jorgenson's face was cut and bleeding, but he was smiling like a happy child. Abe Moss was still unmarked, but he wasn't smiling. He was frowning thoughtfully.

In the beginning they had only the white-bearded Fogarty for a gallery but soon a dozen spectators were on the scene. They came from the houses beyond the saloon, from the shipping pens where the train crew was loading stock. They seemed to spring up out of the ground. They made a wide ring around the two men and watched the struggle with unbelieving eyes. All of them knew Abe Moss; none could quite credit the fact that they were watching the big Skull man take a beating.

Yet that was what was happening. Abe Moss was taking the beating of his life. He was fighting furiously, savagely, desperately; he was dodging, twisting, using every artifice at his command; he was smashing the Swede with blows that should have dropped the big man in his tracks. And the Swede was grinning! Walking into a hurri-

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cane of flying fists, he was shaking them off like water. And ever and again the Swede would swing like a walking beam and Abe Moss would land on his shoulders in the dirt. Until, at the last, the big Skull man's face turned curiously gray and his eyes began to take on a haunted look.

AT the very height of the battle occurred a trifling event which in the excitement passed completely unnoticed by the spectators. At the stockyards the train crew had completed the loading job. The last car door was slammed shut and the little locomotive picked up the slack and backed away toward the main line. It dropped the stock cars there and came around the siding to pick up the empty box car in which Sven Jorgenson had locked the six Skull riders. While the engineer leaned out the cab window and watched the fight the brakeman made the coupling, and then engine and box car slid around the siding and hooked into the train. The engineer whistled out of town; the freight train picked up speed as it headed out across the desert run. The next stop was Eudora, sixty miles away.

And for the fifth time big Abe Moss picked himself up out of the dirt. His face was bruised and battered now, and one eye was completely closed, and his legs were sagging under his weight. The heart was gone out of him. He had lost this fight; he knew it. He made a futile effort to cover as the Swede came charging in, but a fist solid as a chunk of concrete broke through his guard and crashed against his jaw, and he was on the ground again.

Sven Jorgenson towered over him. "How you like Sheriff McNaught now?" Sven Jorgenson asked.

Wearily Abe Moss shoved himself erect. "He's no damn good," he said.

A right to the jaw knocked him flat. The Swede stood over him. "How you like Sheriff McNaught?" the Swede asked patiently, as he might have repeated a question to a backward child.

This time Abe Moss did not get up.

"McNaught is all right," he said.

And then Sven Jorgenson helped him to his feet, brushed him off solicitously, handed him his hat. After that Jorgenson picked up the sawed-off shotgun.

"Now," he said, "we go to Indian Wells, I t'ank."

Abe Moss stared at him. "Indian Wells?"

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"Ya," said Jorgenson. "Indian Wells."

Indian Wells was ten miles farther on. They picked two horses from the bunch at the hitch rack in front of the saloon and rode away together. Abe Moss was a dejected figure slumped over in the saddle, but the Swede was riding high and wide, with the reins in one hand and the sawed-off shotgun in the other.

And that way the two men rode into Indian Wells. In the center of the main street of the little cow town Jorgenson ordered a halt. They dismounted. Carefully the Swede placed the shotgun against the edge of the wooden sidewalk. He faced Abe Moss.

"How you like Sheriff McNaught now?" he inquired.

Abe Moss brushed a hand across his bruised face. "Do we have to go into that again?" he asked.

Sven Jorgenson knocked him sprawling in the white dust of the street.

DEPUTY SHERIFF PETE BAGBY returned to San Hernando on the morning before election day. He dropped wearily in a chair in the jail office and slapped dust from his Levis. From across the room little Sheriff Jim McNaught regarded him sternly.

"I told you," the lawman said, "not to come back without the Swede."

Pete Bagby held up a hand. "Lemme tell you about the Swede," he said.

And quietly, a little awed, he related the saga of Sven Jorgenson as he had gathered it along the line of Jorgenson's march. He came at last to the story of the fight at Fogarty's siding.

"So the Swede gets the drop on them in Fogarty's saloon," Pete Bagby said. "He locks six tough Skull riders in a box car and ships them across the desert. Then he whips Abe Moss something scandalous. After the fight Moss agreed you was all right as a sheriff. So they rode on to Indian Wells."

The lanky deputy shook his head. "He whipped Abe Moss again in Indian Wells. After that fight Moss said you was a real good sheriff. Then they drove on to Satank."

Sheriff Jim McNaught stirred uneasily in his chair. "Don't tell me," he said, "that the Swede whipped Moss again at Satank."

"At Satank," Pete Bagby said, "believe it or not, Abe Moss made a campaign speech. I got there in time. It was the best speech I ever heard."

The lanky deputy paused then, partly for effect, partly to build a cigarette.

"Moss stated," he said, "that you was the finest sheriff this county ever had. He said it was the duty of every free-born American to vote for you. In fact he got a promise all along the line that Jim McNaught would be the next sheriff!"

Little Sheriff McNaught cocked an eyebrow and brought the subject back to the original question. "Where is the Swede?" he asked.

"At Satank," Pete Bagby said, "the Swede shook hands. He shook hands with Abe Moss. He shook hands with me. He shook hands with everybody. A train was just coming in. The Swede got on the train."

Pete Bagby touched a match to his cigarette.

"I guess the Swede got away," he said.

THE END.

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THANKFUL—FOR GRASS

BY S. OMAR BARKER

I asked a grizzled cowhand, as Thanksgiving Day drawed near,
What-all that he was thankful for. He answered like this here:

"The chuck box full of weevils, so there ain't no applesass,
Sow boozem's kinda rancid—but the cattle's got some grass!

"The cook's laid up with tizzick, the cook shack smells of rats,
We're out of canned termaters—but there's grama on the flats!

"My liver's kinda bilious an' my backbone's outa line,
My rheumatism aches me—but the cattle's doin' fine!

"Hoss Wrangler's got the measles an' the ramrod's on a souse,
I'm purt' near outa smokin'—but the feed's O. K. for cows.

"Ax handle's full of splinters an' we're mighty short of wood;
November winds are cuttin'—but the stock will winter good.

"There's bedbugs in the bunkhouse, an' we'll have to fumigate,
But still a feller can't complain—the grazin', it's fust rate!

"Thanksgivin' dinner? Turkey, punkin pie—and such as that?
Please pass the beans. Well, anyhow, the cattle's nice an' fat!

"No matter if your life is like a car that's outa gas,
Nor if your heart's been busted by some beeswax-chawin' lass,
Nor if your liver's bilious or your gold has turned to brass,
An' nothin' you've been hopin' for has ever come to pass;
Nor if the prunes are weevily an' you're out of applesass—
You're *thankful*—on a cow ranch—when the cattle's got some grass!"

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CHECHAHCO BOSS

BY FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Old Del Graham was the only man who could expose the crookedness at the Tuttle Placers—and a killer was set to cut him down!

BIG JIM TUTTLE and his son walked side by side toward the hall where a stockholders' meeting was to be held. Both were tall, with magnificently developed bodies, but today there was a lack of resiliency in the older man's tread, which, with the deep lines of worry etched on his strong face, testified to some inner conflict. He glanced sidewise at his son and spoke wearily:

"Well, Cal, we might as well go in and face the music. When you're as old as I am, you'll know it's easier to face an angry mob than your friends when you're bringing bad news."

A ripple of applause ran through

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the gathering as the two Tuttles took seats at a large table set on a platform. Cal studied the faces turned toward his father. Most of them were old and marked with a strained anxiety. Their eyes seemed to be probing Big Jim's face as if they might be able to learn what was on his mind even before he spoke.

"There's no use of me holdin' back the bad news, folks"—the deep concern in Big Jim's voice took the bluntness from his words—"because that'd only be draggin' out the agony. The Tuttle Placers have got to skip their dividend again. We took a loss last season of five thousand dollars, and from the reports I get, we'll take another this year. We've run into hungry ground, it seems like."

Red Kerry, a pint-sized Irishman with the fighting spirit of a man three times his size, jumped to his feet, words spilling from him. "Jim, we all know you're honest. We know you've always given the little feller a chance to make a honest dollar in every mine you ever owned. We know you'd empty your own pockets before you'd touch money due stockholders—"

A murmur of agreement ran through the crowd. The tribute filled Cal Tuttle with an honest warmth. Things looked tough for his father. This business of skipping dividends looked suspicious, but at least the stockholders were not blaming Big Jim Tuttle.

"I'm sayin' all this, Jim," Red Kerry continued, "so you'll know we trust you to the hilt. But that ground's all been sampled. Most of us know to a yard how much dirt the dredge can move in twenty-four hours. We know the cost per yard, and what she should yield. So"—he roared the word—"there's something that should be investigated. The operation on Money Creek needs a airin', and I'm in favor of givin' it one."

ASK any questions you like," Big Jim said, "and I'll answer them to the best of my ability. I agree that things don't make sense. I'm thinking some of making a trip to Alaska and going into the deal myself."

"No," Red objected, "you can't do that. "We all know the doctor gave you orders to take it easy not long ago."

"Yes, you stay here, Jim," someone shouted.

"Who's runnin' the dredge?" asked Red.

"Del Graham," Jim answered. His tone indicated that should settle everything.

"None better," Red conceded. "Still . . . he's old." He didn't like his own observation, and he hurried to justify it. "I'm old meself, but I'm a better man in the minin' game than any o' these young bucks. An' so is Del Graham."

"Who's the straw boss?" another stockholder asked.

"A man named Brad Dixon," replied Jim. "Del Graham hired him, so he must know his business."

"That young lad at your side, Jim," Red said, studying Cal, "he's a likely lookin' one. Send him up to the mine to work. He can't be your son and not know somethin' about minin'. Make him boss, so he can't be kicked offn the job, then tell him to let Graham and this Brad Dixon to run things to suit theirselves. That'll give him time to watch things and find out what's wrong. There's a leak to plug. Maybe he can find it."

"I'm glad you mentioned this, Red," Jim said. "It's something I had in mind, but I didn't want to

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send up a . . . well, a chechahco boss without the stockholders' O. K."

A score of men were on their feet voicing their approval of the proposal. Some of the worry faded from Big Jim's face.

"One word of warnin'," Red Kerry said, turning to Cal. "You'd better arrive without tellin' anyone. I've knowed of new bosses comin' into a country who had things happen to 'em. Maybe a stray bullet hit 'em, or they had a accident and fell over a cliff, or got drowned in a river. I ain't tryin' to scare you, because you don't look like the kind that'd scare. I'm just openin' your eyes."

"Thanks," Cal answered. "I can use all advice that comes my way. You can rely on me to do my best to plug the leak—if there's a leak."

Big Jim Tuttle prowled about the outfitting store while his son selected the things he needed for his trip to Alaska. He felt encouraged. Cal wasn't buying anything that wasn't essential. Moreover, he was accepting only the best, on the theory that a man is a fool to carry anything but the best on his back. Back packing is too expensive to include inferior goods.

"You can borrow my six-gun," Big Jim suggested. "Just havin' one around when things look bad cheers up a man."

"Thanks for the offer," said Cal. "I can do more with your gun than any I've ever owned."

It wasn't until they were down on the wharf and Cal was ready to board the steamer, that Big Jim betrayed any worry. Then he said with a gruffness meant to conceal his emotion: "Wish it was me instead of you. Take care of yourself, son."

Cal watched the city fade astern, then strolled around, looking over the other passengers. It was a typical Alaskan crowd—miners; men bound for the salmon canneries; wives returning home after a winter Outside; a few salesmen.

Cal enjoyed the trip. He talked guns, hunting, and fishing with his fellow passengers, but did not mention the job that was taking him North. As the steamer approached the place where Cal was to be dropped off, the young man began to pack his outfit. Everything went into the washboard pack, and the load totaled seventy-five pounds, not counting the rifle he planned to carry.

A MINER, learning that Cal was leaving the ship, stopped him on deck for a chat.

"Ain't thinkin' of hittin' the Money Creek outfit for a job, are you?" he asked. Then, without waiting for an answer: "Because if you are, you'd better forget it. They hirin' only special kind of men up there."

"What kind?" Cal asked, his curiosity aroused.

"The Brad Dixon kind," answered the miner. "Boys who don't see what's goin' on around 'em, and keep their mouths shut. When you show up, Dixon will look right through you with those cold, fishy eyes of his an' say, 'Nothin'!' "

"Then what do I do?" inquired Cal.

"If you're smart, you'll make tracks out of the country," the miner said soberly. "Folks Dixon's suspicious of have a way of disappearin'."

"Murdered?"

The miner shrugged his shoulders expressively. "I wouldn't know about that. If Dixon's murdered anyone, it ain't been proved. He's too smart."

"I thought Del Graham was boss up there," Cal remarked.

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"Del Graham? Him? Huh!" The miner's answer was a snort of disgust. Though Cal put other questions, the man refused to say anything but: "A word to the wise should be sufficient."

The steamer stopped two miles off shore and dropped a boat which took Cal into shallow water. He waded to the beach, pulled off his hip boots and replaced them with leather boots that reached no higher than the big muscle of his leg. Then he examined his surroundings with interest.

A small scow had been hauled above the high-water line and placed on several logs. A power boat, badly in need of paint, stood nearby. Each fall, Cal knew, a year's supplies were discharged onto the scow, which was then towed to the beach by the power boat. The supplies were stored in a temporary building, and taken up the creek as soon as the ice was thick enough.

The creek now was a brawling stream, running heavily to mud, due to sluicing operations on the Tuttle Placers. A trail followed the stream, but it was seldom used except when the men went up to the mine in the spring and came out each fall.

As Cal started up the trail, a brown bear ambled along ahead of him. He watched the bear descend to a small creek emptying into the larger stream and commence fishing for salmon. The animal's behavior was proof, if Cal needed it, that human beings kept out of this country. He found the trail pounded down by moose, caribou and bear tracks, and here and there he saw fox and porcupine prints.

Ravens croaked hoarsely at him from nearby spruces. "Certainly a cheerful welcome," Cal told himself wryly. "Even the birds don't seem to want me here."

The third morning after he left the steamer, he reached the mining camp. Cal watched the work with interest. The stream had been diverted, and a dredge was gouging out the channel to bedrock. A leaky boiler supplied the dredge engine with power, and a man, evidently the fireman, was stacking wood near the fire box.

An endless line of buckets brought up the gravel and dumped it. Tailings spilled out behind, leaving the gold, if any, in the riffles. The pond floating the dredge was cold and muddy; the men at work were muck splattered and indolent. Only the trees, drenched by a recent rain, seemed to add a note of brightness to the scene. A row of cabins stood nearby, their eaves dripping on the unpainted walls.

WHILE Cal stood on the edge of the timber gazing at the dredge, one of the men stared at him, then hurried away. A few moments later a broad-shouldered man came down the trail toward Cal. The black stubble on the newcomer's face made his age hard to guess, and his hip boots, thick Mackinaw and sou'-wester hat caused him to loom up like a giant. Instinctively Cal knew this was Brad Dixon. He had the manner of one who was accustomed to obedience and able to compel it if necessary. He looked Cal over for a moment before he spoke.

"If you're lookin' for work," he said finally, "you can turn around and hit the trail back—we've nothing."

His high-handed attitude roused instant anger in Cal, but he forced himself to swallow the hot retort that sprang to his lips. There was no sense in engaging in a battle with Brad Dixon until he had at least learned the lay of the land.

"I've already got a job here," he

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said quietly. "I was sent up from Seattle. I'd like to see Del Graham."

"Graham's sick," the other replied. "I'm Brad Dixon. I run things when Graham is sick, and neither of us sent south for men. I suppose you've got some kind of a letter?"

"Yes, for Graham," Cal answered. "My orders were to deliver the letter to him personally."

"I'll take it," Dixon said.

"It's addressed to Del Graham, superintendent," Cal insisted. He decided to test out Dixon and determine his temper.

The man scowled. "If you've got a letter, give it here. If not, beat it."

Cal decided he had gone far enough for the present. He had gained a slant on the man's character, and there was no use making an issue of the letter. He took it from his pocket and handed it to Dixon.

"I don't imagine there's anything in the letter you can't see," he said. "It's notifying him that the stockholders have elected me general manager of field operations of Tuttle Placers. I'm Cal Tuttle."

For a moment Dixon's face was a study in conflicting emotions, then he said: "That's different. Glad to know you." He extended his hand and Cal shook it. "I suppose the stockholders are kickin' because there're no dividends. I don't blame 'em, of course, but the values aren't here. What are your plans?"

"I'll talk things over with Graham and decide on any change in operation that'll put more pay dirt through the dredge," Cal answered. "I wasn't sent up here to fire anybody."

Brad Dixon took Cal to one of the cabins equipped with bunks. It was larger than the others, and stood a little apart.

"Make yourself at home," Dixon said. "When Graham gets in shape I'll let you know."

"I'd like to see him now," Cal said. He wanted to see if Dixon was still firm on that point.

"It might excite him," the straw boss explained smoothly. "He'd probably figger you'd been sent up to take his job. He's been pretty sick. Out of his head a lot of the time."

"That's too bad," Cal said.

Apparently he gave no more thought to the superintendent. That noon he ate dinner with the men in the cook shack, then walked around watching operations. There was a tenseness among the men which was touched with resentment. Cal sensed it, though outwardly he was treated pleasantly enough. He was aware, too, that Dixon was keeping close watch on his movements.

Cal turned in early that night, explaining that he was tired, but at midnight he dressed and slipped through the darkness to the rear of Graham's cabin. The window moved back readily enough when he pushed against it. He dropped quietly into the room and closed the window after him.

He made his way to the bunk, guided by a man's heavy breathing. A sniff was enough. Del Graham wasn't sick; he was dead drunk. That might be the answer to lack of dividends, Cal thought—a superintendent who was drunk instead of on the job. But Big Jim Tuttle had mentioned no such weakness in the superintendent. Could it be that Dixon was keeping Graham drunk?

A board creaked under Cal's weight, and a thick voice muttered: "Is that you, Brad? Gimme another drink. Gotta brace up and run things. Gotta . . . brace up. Gimme another drink, Brad. It's on the table."

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Cal moved his hand cautiously through the blackness until it touched the neck of a bottle. He pulled out the cork, sniffed, then found Graham's hand and placed the bottle in it. There was silence for a moment, then "Ahhh! That's the stuff. Y'know, Brad, I'm a dirty coyote lettin' things go to hell, the way I been doin'. They trust me down there—Tuttle, Red Kerry and the rest. They're my friends, Brad, an' what'm I doin' to them?"

"What are you doing to them?" Cal asked, trying to imitate Dixon's voice.

"You know what I'm doin'," Graham muttered. "You . . . know." He muttered something, then began to snore.

CAL turned in, resolved to find out just what Graham's words meant. The man was basically honest, and if sobered up, he probably would talk. Just how he would go about the sobering-up process, Cal didn't know, but the sooner Graham was himself, and on the job, the better. The season was short at best.

He went over to the cook shack for breakfast. Brad Dixon was there, apparently just finishing his meal. He greeted Cal pleasantly, and asked if he had slept well.

"Fine," Cal told him. "How's Graham getting along?"

"Don't know," Dixon answered. "I'm goin' over and take a look. If he's in any kind of shape I may tell him you're here. I don't want him gettin' the idea he's bein' replaced, though. He might go to pieces. A nervous or sick man is hard to handle in this country.

Dixon drank the rest of his coffee and left the cook shack. He strolled over to the superintendent's cabin and entered. Graham, bleary-eyed and unshaven, sat up in his bunk.

"Hungry, Del?" Dixon asked.

"Yeah, for a drink," Graham answered. He gazed stupidly at Dixon a moment, then got up uncertainly and sat down in a chair. The bottle that had been near him the night before was empty. "Your cold's better, ain't it, Brad?"

"My cold?" Dixon looked sharply at the superintendent.

"Yeah. When you come in last night you was so hoarse I hardly recognized your voice," Graham said. "I was feelin' kind o' mean about the way things was goin' up here. Said I was doin' 'em dirt. Then you asked me what I was doin' to 'em. Oh, I was drunk, but I remember that much."

"And you told me what you were doin'?" Brad Dixon inquired softly.

"Why should I? You know."

"Here's a drink," Dixon offered, pulling the cork from a bottle he had brought with him.

"Don't think I'll take it," said Graham. "Think mebbe I'd better look around and see how things are. It don't sound like the dredge was comin' this way. And it should come this way if you followed the pay. Sounds like it was swingin' toward that hungry stretch of dirt."

"I've followed the course you staked out," Dixon lied. The dredge was in the poor gravel. He was saving the rich gravel against the future day when the company went broke and he bought dredge and ground at his own price. "Sober up if you feel like it, Del," he said easily. "But better have a eye-opener." He left the bottle, knowing what would happen, then returned to the cook shack.

"How'd you find Graham?" Cal asked.

"He's down in the mouth," Dixon replied. "Figgers his life's a failure and talks of bumping hisself off.

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He'll snap out of it in a few days, I reckon. I'll wait until he does before I break the news about you to him. After that we'll work together and see if we can't get him on his feet again."

Brad Dixon had a pretty definite idea Cal had paid Graham a visit and knew the truth. But he wasn't sure, and the younger man's face betrayed nothing. But of one thing he was certain—all Del Graham needed was an anchor to windward. Then he would pull himself together. Dixon had a hunch Cal Tuttle would prove to be the needed anchor. Once sober, Del Graham's sense of fair dealing would assert itself and he would talk.

"And if he talks," Dixon mused, "I'm liable to end up in the Federal pen at McNeil Island. I think this camp's goin' to have a suicide." He went to his cabin and thought out the details. Whatever he did must be one-hundred-percent perfect. There must be no loose ends to start an investigation.

Dixon rummaged through his chest and found several blank cartridges. He put one in his pocket. That would be enough. Later in the day he went to Graham's cabin. The old superintendent was sitting up in a chair, pale but sober.

"Too weak to look over the job today," Graham explained. "But I'll be in shape t'morrow. I'm on the water wagon now, Brad."

Dixon wasn't surprised. He knew the iron in Del Graham's make-up when he once made up his mind. "Good for you, Del," he said. "You should be in shape tomorrow."

He waited for his chance, then quickly pocketed the old man's .38-caliber revolver. A few minutes later he departed. After leaving the weapon in his own cabin, he got a tray of food from the cook and carried it over to Graham.

THE remainder of the day passed without incident. That night, when the off-shift crew was in the bunkhouse and the radio going loudly, Dixon stepped unobserved through the rear door. He ran to his own cabin, got the revolver, then walked swiftly to Graham's quarters. He looked through the window and saw the man sitting in a chair smoking. He listened, to be sure the noise of dredge machinery would drown out other sounds.

The window was open a crack, and Brad Dixon quietly widened the opening. He aimed the revolver at the old man's temple and fired. The pipe fell from Del Graham's mouth to the floor, and his head tilted forward. That was all.

Dixon waited a moment to make sure his victim was dead. Then he climbed through the window. Inserting the blank cartridge into the chamber, he held the weapon within six inches of the wound and fired. He removed the blank shell and replaced it with the empty shell left from the first shot. Then he let the gun tumble to the floor.

He picked up Graham's pipe and placed it on the table, locked the door, blew out the light, and departed through the window. As quietly as he had left, he returned to the bunkhouse. The radio was still blaring. Some of the men were listening, others were talking. Dixon sat there smoking quietly until Cal Tuttle finished a penny-ante game with several miners, and got up.

"Turnin' in, Cal?" Dixon asked.

"Yeah," Cal answered briefly. "How's Graham?"

"He was pretty down in the dumps this afternoon," answered Dixon. "Said he wanted to be let alone. I

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saw a light when I came by tonight." He stepped to the bunkhouse window. "Guess he's sleepin'. It's dark over there now. Well, I'll see you in the morning."

Cal turned in, wondering what would happen the following day. If Del Graham really braced up and took hold, he'd back his hand. Otherwise some change would have to be made.

The sound of someone pounding on the door awakened Cal from a sound sleep. He could tell it was morning by the odor of frying bacon drifting from the cook shack. He got up and opened the door. Brad Dixon was standing there.

"There's hell to pay," Dixon announced excitedly. "Del Graham killed hisself last night. I went over this mornin' to ask if he wanted any breakfast. Found the door locked. That never happened before. So I went around to the window and looked in."

"That's terrible," Cal exclaimed. He dressed quickly and joined Dixon. The two of them hurried over to the cabin.

"I blame myself for this," Brad said remorsefully as Cal peered through the window. "I should've taken his gun from him. But I never believed he'd really kill himself." He waited until Cal looked around, then said: "Let's get a couple of witnesses and break down the door."

"I'll wait here," Cal said. There was nothing to arouse his suspicions as yet, except his instinctive distrust of Dixon. He was glad the straw boss had suggested bringing witnesses. He had an idea Dixon

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would bring his particular cronies.

Both shifts were awake at this hour of the day. Cal wasn't surprised when Dixon returned with Burl, the night-shift boss, and Miller, the day-shift man.

DIXON broke down the door of Graham's cabin and light streamed in, falling on the dead man.

"Somebody get a paper and write down what we find," Dixon ordered. "This'll have to be reported to the law."

"I have a pencil and paper," Cal said. They agreed on the position of the body, and the gun that had apparently fallen from Graham's hand.

"He must've held the gun pretty close," Dixon said. "Look at the powder burns."

"Yeah," Miller agreed, and Burl nodded. Cal bent down and studied the wound.

Burl picked up the gun and examined it. "One shot fired," he remarked, then he put the weapon down quickly. "Say, maybe I shouldn't've picked up the gun. Might be fingerprints or somethin' on it."

"Heck," Miller scoffed. "Anybody can see it's suicide."

Cal finished his examination and wrote down the position of the wound. Then he read his report aloud. "Is that O. K.?" he asked.

They agreed that it was, and scrawled their names on the bottom.

"What's next?" Burl asked.

"What do you think?" Dixon asked Cal. "You're the big boss, after all." It was a gesture designed to disarm the younger man.

"To be sure nothing is left undone," Cal said slowly. "I think the four of us should load the body into the pole boat, go downstream, then take the power boat to Gold Beach. The deputy marshal there will know what to do. We should make it by tomorrow night."

"Who'll run the dredge while we're away?" Miller asked.

"The boys seem to know their business," said Cal. "They can keep things going."

While Cal and Miller wrapped the remains in a blanket, Dixon and Burl got the pole boat into the water, added a few provisions, and said they were ready.

"I'll be along as soon as I can make out a report on conditions up here," Cal said. "As long as I'm going out, I might as well mail the report. Suppose one of you check on the boat and make sure it doesn't leak—too much."

He hurried to his quarters, slipped inside, left by the back door, and thereupon crowded a half hour's work into ten minutes. The next ten minutes were spent in pecking out a report on the typewriter. He wanted something to show them for the time he spent, in case Dixon was suspicious.

HALF an hour later the pole boat with its three passengers and its grisly burden, started down the creek. It grounded several times on bars, and frequently one of the men had to jump overboard and push the boat through shoal water. It required a couple of hours to get the power boat into the bay, and another half hour to load fuel from a cache. The engine wheezed and missed a lot, then settled down to business.

Thanks to a wind and favoring tide, they arrived at Gold Beach the following afternoon. The deputy marshal was in his office, and he listened to the report of the affair.

"I've sent for the commissioner and Doc Keys," he said finally. "Doc

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acts as coroner. I guess it's just a matter of making out reports and holding the funeral." He glanced at Dixon. "You say Graham had been drinking a lot?"

"Too much," Dixon said soberly. "I tried to get him to taper off, but it was no use." He shrugged. If he'd been one of the men I could have fired him. But he was boss. He had the liquor and authority."

"Too bad," the marshal said. "Pretty fine of you boys bringin' him down here. Wasn't really necessary, though. We'd have taken your signed report and closed the case."

"It was the chechahco-boss idear," Burl said scornfully. "He ain't learned all the customs of the country yet."

Cal made no comment. He bent over the marshal's desk, pretending to study the report he had written. "Be ready for fireworks," he whispered; "this is a murder case."

The marshal said nothing, but a few minutes later he shifted in his chair and managed to pull his gun into a handier position.

A few minutes later the commissioner and coroner arrived. Both had known Graham, and were sorry to hear of his death. The coroner's examination promised to be routine.

"You fellows say it's suicide," he observed, "and you should know."

"Probe the wound," Cal said. "Let's make sure the bullet came from Graham's gun."

"Sure," Dixon agreed. "There's no doubt in my mind, but we don't want folks talkin' later on."

The coroner brought out a bit of gun wadding, then the bullet. Cal shifted his position, blocking the door.

"To me," he said, "that wadding spells murder. There's no wadding in the kind of ammunition Graham's gun shoots."

"That's so," the marshal conceded.

"How'd it get there?" asked the coroner.

"This might be one answer," Cal said grimly. "Somebody who thought Graham was going to sober up and start talking, shot him. Then he shot a blank close up to make powder marks. Here's one of the blanks. I found it in Brad Dixon's room when I made a search yesterday morning after the murder."

Before he finished speaking, Brad Dixon had whirled, drawing his gun. But Cal was ready. He fired, blasting the weapon from Dixon's hand. The marshal's gun was out, and even the coroner, who was a little slow on the draw, produced a weapon. Burl and Miller, who had started to draw, lifted their hands instead.

"I'd heard the finger of suspicion had pointed your way quite a number of times, Dixon," the commissioner said grimly, "and I knew you'd face an accounting some of these days. I always thought it would be after a gun fight, with a lot of good men killed. I never dreamed a chechahco would bring you in on the hoof, so to speak."

"It was the only way I could bring him in," Cal said, "and not be wiped out somewhere along the way. I noticed a bit of wadding when I first examined the wound in Graham's head, and that guided my actions in everything that followed. Now, if you don't mind, I'll prowl around Gold Beach and see if I can't hire a dredge crew. There's going to be a hundred-percent crew turnover when I get back to Money Creek. And I have a hunch it won't be long before Tuttle Placers declares a dividend.

THE END.

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RANGE SAVVY

by H. FREDRIC YOUNG

Besides claiming the highest and lowest points in the United States—Mount Whitney and Death Valley—Inyo County, California, can as well take credit for having the highest and the lowest trees. The Sequoia redwoods run to a height of two hundred and seventy-two feet, while the Alpine willow never grows higher than six or eight inches. Although the Alpine willow resembles a young bush or immature shoots, it really is classed botanically as a tree. Mount Whitney towers 14,502 feet above sea level, whereas Death Valley reaches a depth of more than three hundred feet below the sea at certain points.

Many people do not know that caracul fur coats are made from sheepskin. Originally, the sheep popularly known as caracul, or karacul, were raised only in southwest Asia. Recently it was discovered that for twenty-eight years this same sheep had been successfully grown by a rancher at Dundee, Texas. Since then, caracul sheep have been steadily increasing in number in that area.

The most expensive fur coats are made from the male lamb when it is between five and ten days old. At that age the wool is soft, curly and fine in texture and well colored, whereas a few months later the hair becomes brown or gray, straight, and the texture is coarse. This wool also finds its way into carpets, and some articles of clothing.

Recently introduced into the West is the Hungarian partridge which has proved its value in game-bird restoration. The Hungarian partridge, or Chukar as it is called, runs in coveys of from twelve to twenty birds, and as a breeder it excels most of its kind. On record is one hen which laid a hundred and twelve eggs in one season, all with high fertility.

As a game bird the Chukar has no equal. It rises about twelve feet in the air when flushed by a dog, and flies off with amazing speed. And unlike others of its species, the Chukar ranges farther, its habitat running in areas from two to twelve thousand feet high. Its meat is said to be more delicious than that of any other fowl available to man.

By some mystery of chemistry moisture in some instances produces poison. The Colorado State College was called upon to investigate the death of cattle upon the surrounding ranges. In each case it was found that the cattle had died of poisoning after eating damp barley, oats or cane hay. Spring snows were responsible for the hay becoming wet, and continued moisture caused it to become moldy. Ordinary wet hay is not dangerous, but becomes so when mold sets in. Wet hay should be dried out very thoroughly before it is fed to stock.

Mr. Young will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

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Windy Bill Wicks could usually talk himself out of anything, but the more he talked to that tough stranger, the worse things got.

HORSE-TRADIN' HOMBRE

BY C. K. SHAW

DICK MULLER is the kid me and Bluey Beck is raisin' on shares, and anybody that thinks rearin' a button is a cinch, ain't never seen Dick. Take that from me, Windy Bill Wicks.

The three of us, Dick, Bluey an' me, had left the Bar H and was headin' for Rimrock to see what the news was on the latest stick-up of Denver Dan. I was worried over admiration in Dick's voice when he mentioned how smart Denver was and how easy he made his money,

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just robbin' a bank or stickin' up a stage. Bluey was good at teachin' the kid how to shoot and rope and haze in the night herd, but learnin' him the finer things was plump up to me. I cleared my throat.

"Honesty," I says, "can't be put on the shelf one day and took down the next. Denver Dan and his two pards will be hunted like coyotes and end up as tassels on the end of a rope."

"Denver is mighty smart," the button says back, takin' a keen look at the nag I was ridin'. "Seems to me that horse shys mighty easy, Windy."

I'd been observin' the same thing with a sinkin' of the stomach. My new mare was a neat pattern, packin' good tallow, but she had a way of humpin' and shiverin' at plain noises 'longside of the road.

"She's blind in that right eye," Bluey announces bluntlike. "Ol' Pass-the-hat put the skids under you in that trade, Windy."

"Blind!" Dick yells.

"I thought it was funny Pass-the-hat would give you such a good trade after the skinnin' you give him on the last deal," Bluey added.

Dick looked at me puzzled. "You think Pass-the-hat lied to you about her being sound as a dollar?" he asked.

"Pass-the-hat is honest," I begins firm, knowin' I'd have to put it over to the kid that lyin' comes in different zones. Besides, Pass-the-hat was a deacon, bein' the one to circulate the hat, so's you could ante to the church kitty. I didn't want Dick to get poor ideas of the church folks. "His word is good *anywhere, anytime,*" I goes on. "Horse tradin' don't count. Nobody's their brother's keeper then. If you can't tell the age of a horse by his teeth, you better not trade. If you can't spot a ring bone, or tell when a horse has et loco weed, or has the thumps, you'd better take up a notch in your belt 'fore somebody skins you out o' your pants. That don't mean nobody is crooked or lyin', that's just horse tradin'."

The kid nodded, some puzzled, but workin' on the facts I'd laid down. My horse took another blind stagger, and I wasn't in no humor to orate longer on ol' Pass-the-hat's honesty. Bluey took up the subject, which is unusual for him, as he gen'rally leaves the finer parts of the educatin' up to me. He said anybody that got the skids put under them in a horse trade, had it comin' to them. And he mentioned about gettin' your eye teeth cut. I was gettin' ready to wither him down, when Dick says somethin' about the reform movements Mrs. Hip-shot Bailey and the other ladies of Rimrock are puttin' on.

"Mrs. Hip-shot is always at the head of something us fellers don't like," Bluey shoots back.

If it hadn't been for Bluey's remark about the eye teeth, I'd 'a' not offered any argument favorin' Mrs. Hip-shot, even if her and me is friends. Personal, I think a puncher has as good a right to gamble as a lady has to sing in the choir. But now I was kind o' peeved.

"Dick," I says, "you got to have respect for all reform movements. I'm ashamed of the way Bluey is not for reform."

"Mrs. Hip-shot is now starting a humane society," Dick says. "She says punchers are cruel to their horses, and she's organizing the ladies against it."

Bluey snorted.

"That's a very fine thing!" I was still rememberin' that remark of Bluey's about gettin' your eye teeth

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cut in a horse trade. "I've always thought Rimrock oughta have such a society."

BLUEY spurred to a gallop and me and Dick fogged along with him. It was ten o'clock when we hit town and beginnin' to get hot. We trotted up to a crowd that was gathered back a ways from the Main Street waterin' trough.

Sheriff Ham Nolan ambled over to us wearin' both his guns which I reckoned was due to Denver Dan bein' headed our way. Mrs. Hip-shot Bailey was 'longside him and they was both hot under the collar.

"The man this town has for sheriff is certainly lacking in the milk of human kindness," Mrs. Hip-shot says to some of the ladies on the sidewalk. "Right here on our Main Street a heartless puncher abuses a horse and our sheriff stands by with his hands in his pockets!"

Then I noticed that a puncher was havin' a misunderstandin' with a rawboned roan horse at the waterin' trough. The animal was swingin' a hook-nosed, ornery-looking head and settin' back against the bridle reins. The puncher was a stranger, red-headed, red-faced and mighty low on patience. On account of the ladies on the sideline, he couldn't say much to the maggoty-lookin' roan, but ever so often he would take him across the shoulder with his quirt, and yank on the reins. I wondered why he didn't get in the saddle and sock the spurs to the roan, then I noticed the side of his face was scraped, like he'd been pitched to the street and kind o' slid a few feet.

"Won't some of you men do something?" Mrs. Hip-shot cried. "Is this inhuman treatment to continue until that poor animal drops dead?"

I thought she was underestimatin' the stayin' qualities of the roan. In fact, it looked to me like somebody'd better take that puncher a drink. Then I heard Dick talkin' and my brain quit workin' at all.

"Windy'll do something about it," he says to Mrs. Hip-shot. "He thinks Rimrock needs a society like this."

Mrs. Hip-shot steamed over my way, looking delighted. "I'm glad to hear that, Windy," she says. "That puncher has even resorted to kicking that poor horse."

"My gosh!" I says, my brain still paralyzed.

She turned to the ladies. "Windy Wicks will stop it!" she cried.

Dick threw out his chest and his eyes began to shine. I still couldn't think of nothin' to say so I done the elegant thing by bowin' to the ladies. That settled it. They had me on the way to the waterin' trough in nothin' flat. Ham and Bluey backed away, afraid they might somehow get roped in, too.

The closer I got to that sweatin' puncher, the more I knew I was in for trouble. He saw me comin' and hunched his shoulders, his face go-in' on guard.

"Maybe you think this is your put in?" he asked kind o' hopeful. I could see he'd sure be glad to shift his efforts from that bullet-headed roan to a mere human. He was squat-built, kind o' on my order, with a jaw that hadn't been skimped none. He'd be a tough hombre in a fight, and besides he was lots madder than me. I didn't offer him no smile, which I knew would be fatal, but my brain was beginnin' to work. I had led my horse along with me, because I hadn't thought to drop the reins, and now I give her a drink. When I talked, it was too low for the folks on the sidewalk to hear.

"'Bout the only way to handle

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them that's sired by the devil is to shoot 'em," I says.

THE puncher looked disappointed. "I thought maybe them women had sent you out to tell me to pet him and talk nice."

I laughed and walked around the roan, my brain doin' its regular stuff. "I've always wanted a dusty roan," I says. "I've heard that color is tough on the range—"

"Iron-clad!" that puncher snaps me up so fast the words was singed. "A dusty roan is the best color on the top of the earth, and take a head shaped like this boy's, it means plenty!"

"Does it?" I asks. I didn't want that roan no more than I wanted boils, but neither did I want to tangle with this redhead. I could see Bluey and Ham Nolan waitin' for the fireworks with wide grins. Dick was all puffed up with pride and Mrs. Hip-shot was tellin' the ladies it was lucky Windy Bill Wicks come to town.

The puncher smelled a way to trade himself out o' the mess, and set to work. He waved aside my mention of the hook nose. "Just shows extra determination. You wouldn't want a horse with no determination."

"I reckon not," I says. "How'd he get all them scars?"

"A tree fell on him. Don't think nothin' of this little stubborn streak today—he's nervous with folks lookin' at him. Mister, I'd hate to trade this roan; he's like a brother to me, but I've taken a fancy to that little mare you got there. Don't know why; she's ten if she's a day, and half asleep, and I'll bet she puffs and lathers the first fast mile."

I looked at the little mare with her neat head and kind eyes—on which the cataracts didn't show. "She's a little short of wind," I admitted.

"Sure, and you need an iron-clad horse like this roan. If it wasn't I've took a shine to you, I wouldn't trade. I'll let you have Roany for the mare even up, and that's the trade of your life."

"I've always wanted a dusty roan," I says, watchin' from the tail of my eyes at how Ham and Bluey was fidgetin'. They'd be as popular as mice in the churn if I put this over. "If you're sure he's gentle."

"Gentle!" he cries, uncinchin' his saddle. "You can get off this horse either side."

I jerked off my saddle, beginnin' to figure on how I'd get the roan away from the waterin' trough. The puncher didn't lose no time. He was set on gettin' away before I tried to move that roan out o' the tracks he'd dug for himself. Bluey and Ham ambled over.

"I never saw nobody that could strike up a trade faster'n Windy," Bluey said. "Some day he'll dicker for himself a wife."

"He ain't got this horse led away yet," Ham said, still hopeful.

I'd dropped my saddle by the trough. I could see Roany figured he'd won the round. He'd come out of his backward slant, and rolled his eyes down till they wasn't all white. He was wonderin' if it wasn't time to eat. I had a hunch he'd lead up if there wasn't no saddle on his back. I rubbed his nose and he didn't object.

Mrs. Hip-shot come a ways into the street, sayin' she'd not come too close as the poor animal might stand on his hind legs and start pawin' again. "It was noble of you to trade for him, Windy, to make sure he'd never be abused again."

"Nice ol' boy," I says, givin' the scarred neck a pat. Roany didn't

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especial want his neck patted, but he did see where it was all leadin' to oats, so he give me a nudge.

"Mar-vel-ous!" cries Mrs. Hip-shot, and calls to the ladies to see what kindness can accomplish. Then she slanted Ham a look. "And this is the horse you called an ornery bullet head, Sheriff Nolan!"

"Cinch the leather on him," snaps the sheriff at me, but I didn't hear. I even left my saddle by the trough so's the roan wouldn't see it and get suspicious. I picked up the reins, but didn't put no pressure on them. That hunk of Satan rolled up in a roan hide shook himself, took a look around and led up like an old plow horse.

"See that!" cries Mrs. Hip-shot. "It shows the poor animal recognizes a friend and a *good* man when he sees one!"

I took off my hat to show Mrs. Hip-shot I appreciated her remarks, but now I was beginnin' to wonder how I'd get the roan out of town. Sheriff Nolan and Bluey clumped along with me to the livery stable.

"You're a fool for luck, Windy," Bluey snorts.

"Luck?" I asks, my tones nippy.

"I won't dare show my head around town for a week," Ham moans. "Dang your skin, Windy." Then he brightened. "But you ain't got that roan out o' town yet—not by a jugful."

The words didn't feel good along my spine, but I never let on.

WE didn't talk much about the roan, 'cause Ham and Bluey was sore and I was worried. I give the ornery cuss a good feed of oats, and we all went to Dick's favorite restaurant and had steak an' fried spuds an' apple pie. Then we talked about Denver Dan. Ham said Denver was the hardest man to hold in a net he'd ever tried. And that was a scopical statement, 'cause Ham's no slouch of a man chaser.

"If Denver heads this way, I've got to get him!" Ham says. "If he runs loose much longer, there'll be others tryin' the game."

"He's a smart one," Dick put in. "Six bits you don't get him."

A cloud of dust rolled into town and in the middle of it was Gumboil Georges of the SV with word that Denver had took a fat treasure box off the stage sixty miles up the road, and was headed across the Blues for Idaho. Ham Nolan showed himself fast on the trigger, and soon every mounted man in town was ready to start. Ham scattered them out, takin' the most likely path himself, and tellin' me and Bluey to block the trail over Cherry Mountain.

I heeled it after Bluey into the stable, and was reachin' for my saddle when I remembered the only horse I owned was the roan. Bluey slapped his saddle onto his black.

"I'll let you smell the reward money after I collect, Windy," he says. " 'Less you figure to try some more kindness on that bullet head."

I kept my saddle movin' in the direction of Roany. That was the worst with such horses, you never knew what they'd do. I've seen them travel like lambs all day and at night, when their rider was tired, bog their heads and fly at it.

The roan had finished his oats and et some hay. He didn't object to the bridle, which was a good sign, and he even breathed in my ear he led up so close as we left the stable. Dick was waitin' with Snip saddled; the kid had his .22 resting across in front of him.

"This ain't no trip for kids," Bluey says.

I never saw so much disappointment come over a kid's face. Of

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course when he started beggin', Bluey swallowed, stretched his neck and as usual wound up by passin' the buck to me.

"How about it, Windy?"

"You can go," I tells Dick, "but you got to obey orders same as under the sheriff."

I grabbed my reins, turned my stirrup and reached for the horn. As I lit in the saddle, that roan went onto his hind legs in a spin and started after Bluey who had spurred away. He folded his long legs against his lean belly and fair burnt up the earth. I was soon in speakin' distance of Bluey, but he was speechless.

"Kindness sure does a lot for these bullet heads," I calls across.

When we slowed for the first upgrade, Dick caught up with us.

"That roan is a travelin' fool," he yells. "You made a swell trade."

"Maybe," I says, hopeful as I could.

WE kept up a swift pace, divin' into canyons, and skimmin' the ridges. We knew there'd be punchers from the other side of the mountain hustlin' Denver Dan on his way, and we wanted to be at Cherry Crick to nab him as he crossed the divide. Soon we could see the hogback that was halfway up Cherry Mountain and reachin' across to Sugar Peak. We flashed down to Cherry Crick and sure enough there was no fresh tracks. We was in time. We stopped to let our horses drink.

I give the roan his head and he jammed it hard between his front feet, went up in the air, unjointed himself and come down with a jar that loosened my back teeth. He changed ends so fast I'd swore the sun was in the south. My saddle cracked like a pistol shot as it lifted and popped an' I felt daylight whizzin' under me.

"Stay with him, Windy!" yells Dick.

"Choke the horn!" advises Bluey, probably notin' the amount of daylight 'tween me and leather. "Freeze onto the nubbin!"

I was a mile ahead of him on that idea. By main strength I set him another jump, then lost a stirrup. Things happened rapid after that. I bit the dirt with terrific force, continuin' to scoot along after I lit, which wasn't pleasant since most of the time I was on my face. I come to a dead halt against a boulder, and got up boilin' mad.

"Why didn't you scratch him?" Bluey asked. "Was you tryin' kindness on him?"

I ignored that. I marched toward Roany, and he let me up to him without any trouble. I spit on my hands, grabbed the reins and landed back in the saddle. He let me get settled, then his long spine shook with a convulsion, and he flew at it. He went high and crooked and every jump he landed in an opposite direction from which he'd been facin'. The fourth jump loosened me in the saddle and I couldn't get back. I knew I'd overreached myself. The roan was goin' to win another heat. I parted from him just as he started northeast and changed it to southwest. A tree broke my fall, but the branches took off a lot of skin.

I knew I was licked and didn't make no argument when Bluey said he'd be goin' on to collect that reward money. Dick offered to let me take Snipnose, but I didn't have the heart. I never was one for lettin' a kid take the rap for me.

"Things will work out fine," I said to Dick. "When a feller is honest and does the best he can to help reforms, why—"

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Bluey snorted.

"Do you mean like a silver lining?" the kid shouts as he spurs after Bluey. "I sure hope one comes."

I set down on a rock and looked at the roan tryin' to graze through his bit. I was still settin' there when a voice knifed me between the shoulder blades.

"Stick 'em up, high and handsome!"

I recalled my six-gun had been bucked from my holster and hoisted my paws. I turned, not hopin' for much after that voice, and I wasn't disappointed. The face looked like it had been caught 'tween the cook stove and wall and squeezed. A gun was leveled on the string danglin' from my sack of smokin' in my left shirt pocket.

"Mornin', Denver," I says.

"A scalp hunter, huh?" he asks, ugly as sin. "I got a sizable bunch of scalps myself. Yours will look purty danglin' from my belt."

Neither of us was drawed to the other. My hackles lifted and his was already up. He snarled like a hungry wolf and I could see the handle of his gun was notched on top till it looked like a saw. I stiffened my spine and give him eye for eye, but I knew with that smoke iron he had the long end of the argument. It looked like the silver linin' had passed me up.

"You're pretty cocky," says he, "fer an ol' rooster without no spurs!"

"I'm not lowerin' my sights," I says. "You've got a mean eye, but I'm not took in by it. Go ahead and exercise your trigger finger 'fore it gets rheumatiz." Sometimes it helped to get these thin-headed killers seein' red, but it didn't work on Denver. His eyes got ready for the kill. I let my brains out another notch.

"That's a good-lookin' spotted horse you got," I says more friendly.

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"How about tradin' him for my roan?"

He speared a glance toward Roany.

"That geldin' is tough," I went on. "He's got cast-iron lungs and a heart of steel. He could kick-dust on any posse that ever bloomed. When he gets them legs to foldin' and unfoldin', he makes lightnin' look like it was staked out to graze." I saw his eyes light, so I tapered off. "I'll trade even."

"*Trade!*" The word was thin and sharp. His finger tightened on the trigger. "Thanks," he said, "for willin' me such a good horse."

I shoved in my last chip, knowin' time was about to tick out for Windy Bill Wicks. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" I yelled. "I don't want to trade for that spotted horse, at that. I'm a stranger in the country and the posse would take me for you!"

THE idea took, and in a second his brain was blazin' with it. That's what I've noticed about them thin heads, they go off half-cocked. He ordered me to fetch Roany and stood by with leveled gun while I changed his heavy saddlebags onto my saddle. The roan didn't like the weight. I could see him rollin' up the white of his eyes.

The crick was fringed with trees and on ahead to Cherry Mountain was more trees, but back toward Rimrock there was a stretch of valley as exposed as the palm of your hand, endin' in low hills. Denver ordered me to ride for them hills, figurin' that was the most likely way to meet a posse, and, too, he could watch me.

"When a stranger is killed on a spotted horse," he says, laughin', "word will go out that Denver Dan has been caught and the hunt will be called off. I'm even leavin' you some of the notes that was in the stage strongbox. Get goin'!"

I socked the steel to that spotted horse and struck across the valley. "Windy," I says to myself, "a few more narrow squeaks like that and you'll be an old man."

I pulled Spot to a trot as I nosed him around the first of the hills. Hammer Crick headed five miles up, and cut down for Cherry Crick close to the trail I was ridin'. It was dry now, but in the spring it carried a lot of water and had dug itself a regular canyon across the flat. I planned on follerin' that dry wash back to Cherry, and then workin' down through the trees to see how Denver Dan was comin' with the roan.

My plans was hastened by the nasty buzz of a bullet past my ear. I put Spot for the jump-off into Hammer Crick just as a whole flock of rifles erupted from the hillside. A posse had seen me comin' and got bushed up. Me and Spot lit in the dry wash in a fog of dust.

"Surrender in the name of the law!" yelps a split-tenor voice.

I knew that whinny. It belonged to Shady Mat who dealt for the Marthy in Alkali. The idea of him orderin' anybody to do anything in the name of the law! That posse was probably made up of a bunch of saloon bums out after some reward money. I could of run up a white flag and told them who I was, but then they'd have gone steamin' down to Cherry Crick and spoiled my plans. But I did need a gun.

The chopped-off neigh of a horse comin' around a bend in the wash told me that somebody had clapped a hand on its nose. I picked up a dried piece of wood and began to crawl for the bend where there was some boulders and washed-out holes that made fair shelter. My leg was

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stingin' from a nick a bullet had made in it as I was flyin' over the edge of Hammer Crick, and my usual good disposition was gone. I was willin' to take my chances with Denver Dan, but them whiskey kegs cuttin' down on me was runnin' things into the ground. I took a tight hold on my club and crawled up to the bend. When I looked through some brush hangin' from the top, I saw Poo Higgens standin' there holdin' the nose of his horse with his good hand. The other was hangin' blood-soaked at his side.

"Howdy, Poo," I says, makin' a line for his saddle gun. I took the rifle and edged up to the rim of the wash where I cut loose at a couple of hats I saw bobbin' above boulders. I felt better as I slid back.

"Reckon them hats was fair new," I says to Poo, "judgin' from the cussin'!"

Poo had met one of the three hombres that made up Denver's gang and come off second best. He was too weak from his drilled shoulder to want to get into any more fights, but he loaned me one of his short guns. He even let me take his sorrel which was fresher than Spot. He said he'd run up a white flag and tell the saloon-bum posse that it was him they'd stampeded over the edge of the wash, and that way keep them busy till I'd had my go with Denver Dan.

THE wash angled across the flat and run into Cherry Crick a half mile above where I'd left Denver Dan and Roany. I worked down through the trees, hopin' I wouldn't be too late. I wasn't. Cussin' was the first thing I heard, and it was choice. A puncher bogged in the quicksands of the Canadian couldn't 've improved on it. I crawled to a place where I could get a view.

A couple of saddlebags was on the ground and stuff was scattered hither and yon. Denver's face was skinned, his hat gone and most of his shirt. He'd sure made some manful efforts to set that roan. He had his automatic hung at a dead level between the eyes of Roany, but while I was watchin' he lowered it slowly. He didn't dare shoot. The horse was his only chanst to get away.

"Stick 'em up!" I yells.

I give him that one chance to surrender peaceful, but he wasn't lookin' for peace. He hunched to the side and chopped down with the gun already in his hand. The triggerin' was rapid from the start. I've never put myself up 'longside of Bluey in speed matches, but when a feller is reared upon his hind legs fightin' for his life, there just natural ain't no flies on him. When a chunk of lead took me in the side, I most wisht I'd cut down on that killer in cold blood from the brush.

Lead was chokin' the air and the bark of sixes splittin' the ears. I felt the draft of bullets as they passed my cheek, and batted as they zipped in front of me, but I kept that gun of Poo's straight out before me and kickin' like a steer.

I knew my first shot had been a tellin' one, and wondered why that outlaw didn't start givin' up the ghost. Then he began to slump. He shot once from his knees, and again as he rolled over on his side. Then he let go and laid still.

I went over an' heaved his empty gun in the brush, then felt him for an extra. I was kind o' dizzy, so I set down to wait for him to come to. I noticed blood tricklin' down my left leg and soppin' in my boot. Slidin' off the rock where I'd kind o' dropped down, I crawled toward the crick. My shoulder was painin' and makin' my head feel big. Cold water

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helped me see through a black cloud that was formin' over the sun, and I managed to get some shells into my gun.

I knew I could hold out, still I was glad when I heard riders a-comin' from Cherry Mountain. It meant Bluey had heard the shootin' and was comin' to investigate. Sheriff Ham Nolan was with him as they whipped round the bend and they was splittin' the breeze at a lively clip.

Denver was just rousin' and he snarled like a caged mountain lion when he saw the star on Ham's shirt. Then he looked at me with a glare that was as hot as a brandin' iron.

"That hombre unloaded a roan horse on me," he was pointin' to me. "He got me to trade, then slipped back and bushed me."

Ham looked as if he didn't know whether to believe him. "Windy engaged you in a horse trade?" he gapes.

Dan nodded sullenly.

Bluey was plumb beat out. "If you ever meet Gabriel," he shoots at me, "you'll trade him out o' his horn 'fore he gets to toot it."

While Bluey was fixin' up my wounds, Dick come bustin' around the bend, workin' on Snip with his quirt and his .22 across his lap. He come to a dust-slidin' stop, his eyes buggin'. He was scared when he saw the blood in my boot, but I told him it wasn't more'n a pin scratch and that I'd be around in a few days. You could've wiped his eyes off with a saucer when he heard Ham callin' the prisoner Denver.

Ham dressed the outlaw's wounds and loaded him on a horse. The posse had come tearin' over from the hills and even Poo Higgens got there. Poo was mighty relieved that his sorrel horse hadn't been hurt. He said he'd got real worried when the fight busted out. Dick rode back with me and Bluey as we headed for Rimrock.

"It sure pays to be for reform movements," the button declared enthusiastically. "You stopped that puncher from beatin' Roany, then Roany bucked Denver off to show you he was grateful. Maybe Mrs. Hip-shot will ask us over for chicken and dumplin's again, because she'll realize more than ever now what a fine citizen you are." He looked at Bluey. "Windy sure is smart, ain't he?"

Bluey nodded, kind o' reluctant. "Anybody," he says, "that can engage an outlaw in a trade when he's only two jumps ahead of a posse, is plenty smart."

"You betcha!" cries Dick and I felt pretty good because I knew he was through admirin' Denver Dan.

THE END.

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Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

DURING the past year, inquiries have been running unusually heavy on muzzle-loading guns. This is probably due to the efforts of the National Muzzle-Loading Rifle Association, in sponsoring matches with the old-time rifles. Various shooting clubs have also taken keen interest in this particular type of work.

Generally speaking, unless you really know the subject, it does not pay to attempt to play around with the old muzzle-loaders. Also, do not attempt to shoot them unless you use the proper components plus a gun in good condition. A badly rusted gun should never be used.

If you intend to give that old muzzle-loader a new lease on life, do not attempt to use smokeless powder as the guns were never designed for this type of propellent. Use only black powder or King's semi-smokeless, preferably black powder if you can get it. If you wish to use round balls in a .31 caliber rifle, stick to a size suitable to fit the bore.

Measure your charge of powder very carefully and with the butt down and muzzle up, pour in the powder, being sure that none is spilled. If you wish to use a patch over the barrel, try lightly oiled linen cloth. Place this small patch over the muzzle, being careful to center it over the bore. Then place the round ball in the center of the patch and press it down with the thumb until it is flush with the surface. Then with a ramrod, push the ball and patch down slowly and steadily until it contacts the powder.

The following list of literature is available to our readers: STRAIGHT SHOOTING, SNAP SHOOTING, WINCHESTER AMMUNITION HANDBOOK, SAVAGE, STEVENS, FOX, COLT, SMITH & WESSON, HARRINGTON & RICHARDSON, 3c each; MOSSBERG, MARLIN, 2c each; WESTERN AMMUNITION HANDBOOK, 5c; REMINGTON ARMS AND AMMUNITION, 6c; and a large three-pound bundle of assorted catalogs, 30c each and 38c west of Chicago. None can be sent to Canada. Postage stamps are accepted.

Application blanks for membership in the National Rifle Association may be obtained by writing to Mr. Sharpe. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp with your request.

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If it does not slide down easily, the patch is too thick or the ball too large for the rifle and if you attempt to ram the ball down, you merely upset it and destroy all accuracy.

Unless the ball is seated with uniform pressure on the powder every time, you get very poor accuracy. Always load with the hammer at half-cock. This leaves the nipple open to permit the escape of air compressed in the barrel when the bullet is pushed home. Always be certain that no percussion cap is on the nipple, when you are loading.

The old-timers used patches made of linen, paper, and even buckskin. The linen and paper were to be preferred due to the uniform thickness. Patches were used either wet or greased. For target shooting a wet linen patch performed better but the hunter was handicapped in this respect since he frequently carried his rifle loaded for some time and a wet patch would cause rusting of the bore. Accordingly, he soaked his linen in grease and removed the surplus by blotting between layers of clean cloth.

The old-timers who desired to keep their guns in perfect condition used to remove the nipple after each day's shooting, using a special nipple wrench for this purpose. The barrel would be removed from the stock and the breech end inserted in a pail of hot water. Cold water would do if hot were not available. A cleaning rod slotted at one end, preferably of wood, would be covered with a rag also previously wet, whereupon the gun could be cleaned by pumping the rod up and down from breech to muzzle. The hot water would dissolve the powder fouling and the action of the cleaning rag would wipe it loose from the inside of the bore. The pumping action would suck water into the barrel and then expel it again through the nipple opening in the breech.

If you attempt to clean a gun in this fashion, be certain that it is wiped dry afterwards. Once it is clean, boiling hot water may be poured from a tea kettle into the barrel to run out through the breech end until the metal is too hot to hold in the hand. Heavy gloves prove handy for this. This type of heat will not harm the gun in any way. A dry cleaning patch is then run through the bore to wipe out surplus drops of water, particularly at the breech end and the heat of the barrel will complete the drying. After it is properly dried, the barrel can be swabbed out lightly with an oiled patch and will then keep indefinitely in good condition.

Before you attempt to do any shooting with your muzzle-loading rifle, it is well to examine the nipple carefully. Most nipples on old-time rifles are in poor condition but fortunately due to the present demand, new nipples are available. Be sure you get the right size for your particular gun.

Muzzle-loading guns may have become obsolete many years ago but they are now enjoying a new lease on life. Slow work shooting them but a great deal of fun.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*

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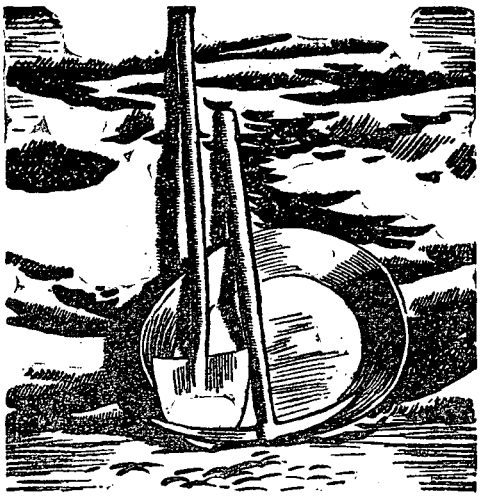

Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

THE big demand for vanadium, an alloy metal used in toughening steel has caused a boom in vanadium prospecting out in Colorado. Early last spring there were only a few hundred vanadium prospectors and vanadium ore small mine operators out in the Colorado country where the metal is found in the general vicinity of Telluride and over in Montrose and San Miguel Counties in the southwestern part of the State. A few weeks ago it was reported that more than a thousand new prospectors were in the field.

That's a sizable boom in any mining district. One prospector reports staking several claims in the Long Park area and refusing a flat thousand dollars each for two of them. Two prospectors in the Paradox sector are reported to have received more than fifteen hundred dollars for a single ton of high-grade ore.

Small wonder word of the boom is spreading around, or that readers are writing in and querying us on vanadium ores, as did G. K., of Memphis, Tennessee. "Is there money in prospecting for vanadium if you are successful?" his letter asked. "I have heard there was a lot of prospecting for that metal out in Colorado. Is that so? Where? Are there other places in the United States where vanadium is found and mined? I am very interested in this."

George you are not the only one that's interested as you can see from our opening paragraphs. There's more than just bean money in a good find of commercially workable vanadium ore. Plenty more. How much of course depends on the richness and size of the deposit you are able to locate. Aside from the country's general present-day increasing demand for the metal, one of the important factors that has helped the boom in the basin area of San Miguel and Montrose Counties, Colorado, was the decision of the big companies in the section to purchase and treat the ore mined by the small operators.

There are several distinct types of vanadium ores, but almost all of them, contrary to the usual habit of metalliferous ores, are found in sandstone formations. In Colorado the deposits around Paradox Valley are essentially ores of the rare metal, uranium, carrying appreciable quantities of vanadium. But in the Placerville district of San Miguel County the ores are essentially vanadium deposits—the vanadium mineral, roscoelite, appearing in a characteristic dark-green sandstone formation. Normally the local sandstones are apt to be light in color. But when they contain vanadium they are usually a dark, olive-green. This distinctive color

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trait shows up especially well when the sandstone is wet.

Roscoelite, the vanadium mineral, itself is a soft, deep-green mica. It can be split with the fingernail into thin sheets when found in big enough pieces. It can also be scratched with the fingernail, and the scratch mark will be white. It frequently occurs, however, as very small pieces disseminated through the sandstone, and it is this that gives the sandstone its greenish color. The pure mineral contains up to almost thirty percent vanadium metal.

Another important vanadium mineral is Vanadinite, a lead-vanadium combination carrying not quite twenty percent of vanadium. This mineral commonly occurs as brittle crystals of red, yellow or green. It is a little harder to scratch than roscoelite, possibly needing a copper coin instead of your fingernail to make a mark on it. The scratch will be white. Vanadinite is heavy owing to its lead content.

There are a number of fairly simple determinative chemical tests for vanadium minerals that can be used if you are in doubt as to the identity of the specimen from physical appearance alone. One is to take a little of the powdered mineral to be tested on the tip of a knife blade and put it in a porcelain dish. Add about a teaspoonful of strong hydrochloric acid and boil for a couple of minutes. Be careful of the hot acid and the fumes. Let the solution cool. Add a teaspoonful of strong nitric acid. Boil as before and again let cool. Then add a teaspoonful of strong sulphuric acid and boil over an open flame until dense white fumes are given off. Let cool to room temperature. Next carefully add about three teaspoonfuls of cold water. Boil for a couple of minutes and then filter the solution.

Save the clear liquid that filters through the filter paper in a glass or porcelain receptacle. Put about a teaspoonful of this solution into a test tube and add a drop or two of fresh hydrogen peroxide. When the peroxide is added the solution will turn a brownish-red if the mineral used in the test contained any appreciable amount of soluble vanadium. Only persons familiar with handling acids and chemicals should attempt a test of this description.

For others, when in doubt as to the identity of any mineral which you believe might be a valuable ore, it is always wise to knock off a representative sample and carry it with you. Showing it to other, perhaps more experienced prospectors, or to some qualified mining engineer who may be working in the vicinity at the time will often result in its being correctly identified for you. If there is still doubt send a sample to the Mining Bureau of the State in which the mineral was found.

Aside from the Colorado vanadium deposits, vanadium has been mined and produced from occurrences of the ore around Goodsprings in Clark County, Nevada, in Grand and San Juan Counties in Utah, and around Mammoth, Arizona.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

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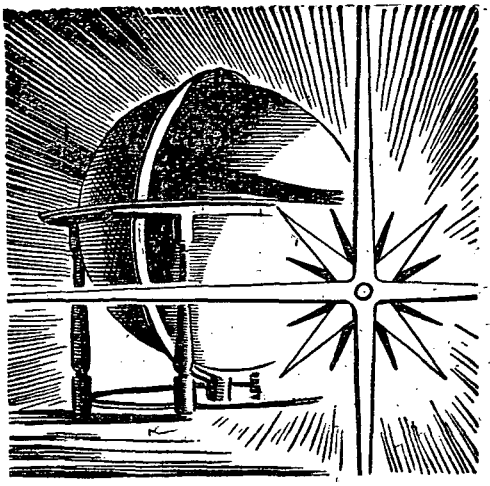

Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

THERE is an art in planning what to take along on a canoe trip, and a knack in knowing how to pack it. Each cruise really requires its own organization of time, personnel and the supplies to be carried. But the final decisions should be based on certain sound fundamental principles of successful canoe travel.

Realizing this, F. R., of Fort Wayne, Indiana, wrote and asked us if we would give him, and perhaps others of the growing clan of canoe-cruise enthusiasts, a few pointers on how to outfit for a canoe trip of at least several days' duration.

The foremost consideration in canoe-cruise camping, F. R., is to keep your gear as light and compact as the circumstances of your proposed trip will allow without sacrificing the essentials of camping comfort that make outdoor living a joyous existence rather than an ordeal. There is no point in turning the trip into a duel with nature to see which is the tougher.

One of the most important items therefore is adequate shelter. Don't rely simply on cots, or sleeping bags and starlit nights. In a rain, and that is what you must provide against, the lee of an upturned canoe is equally unsatisfactory. Take along a good, light, waterproof tent. Not a heavy wall-type tent, but one of those handy A or wedge shelters that can be erected by shear poles, or held up by a ridge rope lashed taut between two trees. A seven-by-seven-foot size will be big enough for two persons, and weighs about ten pounds.

Such a tent is large enough for two people to bed down in comfortably and to hold your packs and the rest of the camp duffel. It is not roomy enough for living or eating quarters. But if you will add a ten-by-twelve, or twelve-by-twelve-foot light waterproof tarp to your equipment you can use this in a multitude of ways to extend the comfort of your living quarters. Fitted with grommets worked into its four edges, the tarp can be erected as an awning in front of the tent, or it can be used as a side-extension windbreak enabling you to live in front of your tent shelter in more comfort and convenience. Such a tarp really adds a portable outdoor room to your sleeping quarters.

Wood fires of course give the genuine outdoor flavor to your nightly bivouac, and for your morning breakfast. However, if more speed is desired, and for heating up a noon-day snack, or in regions where open fires are restricted or forbidden by law, a camp stove of the compact, folding type may be desirable. Such a stove of course entails carrying an adequate supply of

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the proper fuel—gasoline or kerosene depending on the type of stove. Personally we prefer taking a quart thermos bottle along and brewing sufficient coffee in the morning to fill the thermos after breakfast needs are supplied. This affords the lift of a hot noon-day drink without time lost in building a fire or setting up a stove.

Blankets and food depend to such a large extent on the length and type of trip, the place, the season and the individual's own taste that generalization on these items would serve little purpose right here. Remember, however, that, weight for weight, pure wool blankets are warmer and more satisfactory than those that are part cotton. A good set of wool blankets is the pride of most outdoorsmen.

Other gear should include your fishing tackle, hunting equipment, compass, flashlight, matches with a reserve supply in a waterproof container and two first-aid kits, one for yourself, the other for your canoe. The latter is very important. It should include a spare paddle, canvas patches, marine glue, twine, pliers, tacks, nails, and some fine wire.

Portaging your canoe, river rapids, channel obstructions, shallowly submerged rocks, stumps, brush, river debris and sharp stones at the water's edge all may cause accidents that result in tearing the canvas covering of your craft or in other damage. Unless you are equipped to make the necessary emergency repairs on the spot, your trip may come to a sudden halt miles from nowhere and you may even be seriously inconvenienced getting back to civilization.

While we are on the subject of canoes here are a few simple rules that will help avoid accidents to your craft.

1. Always load your canoe only when it is floating freely on the water.

2. Don't attempt to lift your canoe from the water unless it is empty and can be easily handled.

3. Don't make the mistake of loading your canoe on shore, and then dragging it into the water.

4. Don't sit on or in your canoe when it is on shore and out of the water.

Additional gear that should not be forgotten are your cooking utensils of course, a god ax, candles, spare rope, and a good map of the locality to be traversed. Food supplies should be put in waterproof provision bags, and it is much handier to pack everything in suitable large dunnage bags, or pack sacks that can be conveniently lifted in or out of the canoe as units.

Keep the weight of your equipment including food around two hundred pounds. Even a medium-sized, sixteen-foot canoe will take that load plus two average-weight canoeists without strain. Though the theoretical rated capacity of such a craft is but little under half a ton; it is best in actual practice not to exceed a total load of between five and six hundred pounds.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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The Hollow Tree gets goin' this week with an interesting letter from out Illinois way, and it looks like you male members of our audience had better light a shuck 'cause it sure 'nough looks like a quilting party is under way! Mabel Elston speaking, and here's what she has to say:

Dear Miss Rivers:
I have been resting beneath the shade of the Hollow Tree for some time, but this is my first attempt at leaving a letter therein. I was born at the turn of the century and was employed in a large office for a number of years. I am at present, however, keeping house for my aged father. I enjoy all kinds of sports, like to raise flowers, do fancywork, and piece quilts. I am trying to collect quilt patterns and stories of the women who pieced them. You, living along the Atlantic seaboard, what kind of quilts kept your ancestors warm during the Revolution? You, of the deep South, what quilts graced the old plantation houses? You, in the far West, what quilts crossed the plains with your ancestors in the covered wagons? Won't you please help me piece together the history of our country's women through their quilts?—Mabel Elston, 808 So. 3rd Street, Pekin, Illinois

Herbert is a college student—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a boy nineteen years old in my second year of college. My favorite hobbies are writing letters, hiking, and doing conservation work. I should like to make friends with Pen Pals both near and far. Those who write can expect quick answers. If anyone is interested in Michigan and surrounding territory, I have much information on it, so come on, students and everybody, please write.—Herbert Vandort, 130 Langdon Avenue N. E., Grand Rapids, Michigan

Beverly likes active sports—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am sixteen years old and would like to have some Pen Pals. My favorite sports are swimming, hiking and skiing, and I also enjoy camping out. I would like to hear from Pals living in Western States.—Beverly Davis, R. F. D. No. 4, Rome, New York

Farm life interests this Pal—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a widower forty-six years old and am looking for some real Pen Pals. I have placer-mined gold in California, Oregon, Washington and Idaho. Have lived in California for thirteen years and can tell you lots about the movie folks here. I expect to move to Oregon next year to live on a small farm as I think a farm is a good place to live if you know how to make a living from it.—Ray LaCheur, 624 S. Normandia, Los Angeles, California

Write to this shut-in—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would appreciate your printing my plea for Pen Pals. I am a shut-in in a sanitarium and letters would help to while away the lonely hours. I am interested in sports, and enjoy reading and writing letters. I'll be glad to exchange snaps and will answer all letters. Being just twenty years of age, I'd like hearing from young men and women around that age. I'll be looking forward to loads of letters from all sections of the country.—Charlotte Pzajka, 5601 N. Pulaski Road, Chicago, Illinois

Jack is studying flying—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a twenty-three-year-old boy who would sure enjoy being a member of the Hollow Tree. I am a member of the U. S. army air corps at Randolph Field, Texas, and would like to hear from boys and girls everywhere. I will answer all letters and trade photos with anyone, so how about hearing from some of you?—Jack Shine, 46th School Squadron, Randolph Field, Texas

From the Argentine comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would be very grateful if you would print my plea for Pen Pals between sixteen and twenty years of age. I've visited several countries and have lived in different parts of the Argentine. I enjoy all sports, but my favorites are ice skating, swimming and riding. I am also fond of dancing and music. Here's hoping someone will write to me because it gets a bit lonely down here at times.—Valerie Kennard, Estancia Guer-Aike, Casilla 39, Rio Gallegos, Terr, Santa Cruz, Republica Argentina

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Wilfred wants lots of friends—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a young boy twenty-one years old and came back to America two years ago to study English. I was going back to Europe this year, but on account of the war I will be here for some time. As my family is still living in Europe and I just moved to this town last week, I'm feeling pretty lonesome and would appreciate some friendly letters from Pen Pals everywhere.—Wilfred E. Mis, P. O. Box 94, Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts

Virginia lives on a ranch—

Dear Miss Rivers:
May I join your happy Hollow Tree gang? I am eighteen years old and would like to hear from Pen Pals near my own age from all over the United States and Alaska. How about it, boys and girls? I have some fascinating hobbies—writing to Pen Pals, collecting snapshots and post cards and crocheting. I would be glad to exchange snaps, post cards, and most of all letters. Our mailbox is large, and I hope you Pen Pals will give it a good workout. Darkness comes early in Washington now, and I want lots of letters to answer during the long winter evenings after the chores are done here on the ranch.—Virginia Wilson, Route No. 2, Monroe, Washington

Lloyd is a member of the CCC—

Dear Miss Rivers:
My hopes are high but chances slim of this ever being published in the Hollow Tree, but will try it anyway. I would like to hear from Pen Pals from all over, especially the East. My home town is in Ohio, but I am in the CCCs out in Oregon and it sure gets lonely. I am a first-aid attendant here at camp and find it very interesting. To all who answer, I promise letters right away. Here's hoping I hear from lots of Pen Pals in the near future.—Lloyd Davis, Camp Wickiup, Lapine, Oregon

Nancy wants to be a famous dancer—

Dear Miss Rivers:
May I come in? I would like to get some Pen Pals through your Hollow Tree. I am an eighteen-year-old girl and love all outdoor sports. My ambition is to become an outstanding dancer, and I love music. My hobby is collecting picture post cards. Old or young, near or far, all are welcome. I promise prompt answers and will gladly exchange snapshots.—Nancy Jones, General Delivery, Morganton, North Carolina

Here's a nice offer—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am very lonesome and want lots of Pen Pals, but most of all I want a partner as a companion. A young man who is good company and trustful, to take care of my camp and share alike. Won't someone who likes the country write to me. Here's hoping I receive many letters. I will answer all mail.—Andy, Box 32, South Casco, Maine

Lonesome gals write to Kathleen—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am eighteen years old and would like very much to hear from Pen Pals from everywhere. I enjoy all outdoor sports such as skiing, skating, horseback riding, swimming and tennis. My hobby is designing and making my own clothes, and I also love to knit. Won't some lonesome girls write to me, especially farm girls, as I know they are lonely.—Kathleen Anne Landry, 21 Livingstone Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

Gerald is giving you all another chance—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I hope there is room in the Hollow Tree for me. I have tried before this to make Pen Pals through the Tree, but so far have been unsuccessful. I am eighteen years old and would like to have many friends. I like most every sport as well as dancing and writing letters. I promise to answer all letters.—Gerald Lamphear, Roseville, Michigan

Horses are Elva's main interest—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Please let me come into the Hollow Tree—the last time I didn't make it. I am fourteen years old and my main interest is horses. I love horseback riding, training horses, and rodeos. Do any of you have the same likes? I'd prefer to hear from boys and girls between fourteen and twenty years old from coast to coast and in foreign countries. Since I'm so interested in horses and rodeos, cowgirls and cowboys are especially welcome, but I'll answer all letters.—Elva Breit, Bolckow, Missouri

This letter comes from afar—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a young boy fifteen years old living in Africa and would like some pen friends in America. My favorite sport is football, and my hobbies are gardening and collecting pictures. Here's hoping I get lots of mail.—Isaac Prah, P. O. Box 16, Cape Coast, Gold Coast, British West Africa

Mrs. Reynolds has wide interests—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a widow forty-two years old and am not lonely for I have three small boys to keep me busy, but nevertheless I would like a few Pen Pals. I have many hobbies, among them collecting curios of all kinds and old stamps, books and coins. I'm also very much interested in Mexicans and Indians and their way of living, and I think their handiwork is very beautiful. I'm also interested in all sports—hunting and fishing, and enjoy exploring out-of-the-way places. I'm now taking a course in nursing by mail and when I get my diploma, I'm going out to the far West and make my home. Although I'm a Southerner by birth I've lived out there before and liked it very much. I'll not take up any more room now, but will close hoping to hear from men and women of my age from all parts of the United States.—Mrs. Fannie Reynolds, Route No. 2, Box 224, Sanford, Florida

We get a vote of thanks from Ernest—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Five years ago I had an appeal for Pen Pals in the Hollow Tree and, among the other answers, I received was one from a Pal in South Rhodesia and one from Australia. I have kept up a correspondence with them ever since and wish to thank your department for helping me to get in touch with them. They are both stamp collectors and we certainly have helped each other considerably besides having many pleasant hours corresponding. So here I am again with my plea for more Pen Pals, young and old, single or married—everyone is asked to write to me.—Ernest Schlick, 261 North York Street, Elmhurst, Illinois

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Missing Department

WILSON, FARRINGTON SCOTT—He is my stepson and I would greatly appreciate any information as to his whereabouts.—Thomas Beals, 2943 Mission Street, San Francisco, California.

HALL, J. S. and MARTHA HAND—They are my uncle and aunt. My uncle was last heard from about fifteen years ago, at which time he was living in Swifton, Arkansas. He had three children, Jasper, Napoleon and Lona. The last time I heard from my aunt she and her husband were living in Oklahoma. If anyone knows their whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—Mrs. Sarah Bittle, Heber Springs, Arkansas.

ATTENTION—Will anyone knowing the whereabouts of Emerson Phillip Skinker, or Phillip Condon, who worked as an orderly in the Georgetown Hospital in Washington, D. C., in 1938 write to me. "Dear Phillip, please let me hear from you. I am in New York and can get you a good job here with me. I am using my home address."—Ross O. Brewer, 705 4th Street Northwest, Apt. 102, Washington, D. C.

WOOLHEATHER, PAUL—He is a friend of mine and I would appreciate any information concerning his whereabouts. When last heard of he was in Sterling, Colorado.—Corinne Clough, 520 Belmont Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

WORRELL, ERNEST—He left New Brunswick about eighteen years ago, served in the U. S. army in Hawaii, and was discharged in San Francisco in 1936. He has light hair, blue eyes and weighs about one hundred and forty pounds. His anxious father is asking for any information about him.—William Worrell, Dumbarton Station, New Brunswick, Canada.

KINNEY, ORAN—He is my brother, John Kinney's son. He was last heard from in 1907 at which time he was working in a drug store in Kansas City, Missouri. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—C. E. Kinney, Clifton, Colorado.

MULSTAY, EDWARD—During the World War he was a sergeant in the headquarters troop, 86th Division, stationed at Camp Grant, Rockford, Illinois. He was married to a Rockford girl as soon as the War was over and lived there until about 1929. He is about forty-six years old and about five feet two inches tall. If anyone knows his present whereabouts please get in touch with me, or tell Eddie to write to his buddy.—William Everett, 4058 Ellis Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

● There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

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THE Crimson HORSESHOE

Part Four

BY PETER DAWSON

The Story So Far:

Breaking parole in New Mexico where he killed a man in self-defense, Jim Allard heads for the Circle A at the invitation of his distant cousin, Hugh Allard who says he has a job for him. On the way Jim meets an old friend, Billy Walls, who explains that he has been working for Allard but is leaving the country because a range war is building up. Their talk is interrupted by a hidden gunman who shoots at Walls. The latter dies after pressing a few bloodstained buckshot pellets into Jim's hand with the words: "They rolled out of a dead man's throat only this afternoon. Judge—"

Walls' reference, Jim learns, upon reaching the town of Sands, is obviously to Judge Kurt Locheim whose mangled body had just been found. The judge, whose death, however, is put down as an accident, had been expected to deliver a verdict on a dam which Hugh Allard wants to build. The project has been fought by Allard's neighbor, Miles Kittering, owner of the Block K, because it would leave his land

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without water. The bitterness between the two men has been increased by Allard's charges that Kittering has been rustling cattle from him.

At the Circle A Jim has an interview with his cousin whom he finds a cold, ambitious man. Jim is puzzled and suspicious when Allard explains that he has made a will naming Jim a co-heir to his estate, but finally sees through the scheme as an effort to get him to take on the dispute with Kittering. Then, Jim surmises, when he has killed Kittering, Allard will either turn him over to the law for breaking parole or have him bushwhacked. He turns down the proposition flatly, and is left in no doubt that he has made an implacable enemy of his cousin.

Disgusted with Allard's tactics, Jim goes to the Block K to ask for a job and to warn of Allard's plot. Fats Holden, the foreman, refuses to hire him because he is afraid he is a Circle A spy, and Jim rides on to Sands and gets a room at the hotel. That night a railroad man named Chalmers, who occupies the adjoining room, is murdered, and Jim, finding himself threatened with arrest, hightails out of town. Some hours later, riding on Block K range, he meets Fats Holden, who announces that he has reconsidered and is now willing to take him on.

CHAPTER X

TWO TELEGRAMS

SILENCE held for a few seconds, then Jim nodded to Holden's gun lying on the ground, smiling meagerly.

"Better put that on before you forget it, Holden," he drawled.

It was a gesture that sealed the understanding between them, vague though it was. Here was a man Jim could trust. It was already plain to him that he also had Holden's trust and belief of everything he'd said.

Holden picked up the gun and cinched it about his bony hips. "You'll want to know a few things," he said. "Fire away and I'll give you all the answers I can."

Jim nodded. "First, why won't Kittering fight this trouble when it's pretty plain he didn't bring it on himself? Next, I ought to know where you and Kittering were the afternoon the judge was killed and the other night when Elder and Walls cashed in."

Holden grinned. "Danged if you'd ever take a prize for bein' shy about things!" He sobered and heaved a long gusty sigh. "Two afternoons ago I was helping Johnny Dawes cold-shoe a span of mules at our corral. I don't know where Miles was. I wish to hell I did! By the way, that was him with me yesterday when you rode into the layout. At the time, I didn't want you to know it. Thought you might be there to get him."

"He had the chance to meet Locheim and kill him?" Jim asked. He had already guessed that the rider with Holden in Block K's pasture the day before had been Kittering.

Holden nodded, his face gathered in worry despite his attempt to conceal it. "Yes. Only I know Miles like a book. Nothing would drive him that far. Besides, the judge was looking at things his way."

Jim filed this bit of information in the back of his mind. "How about that night?" he queried.

Fats had a ready answer. He told Jim what he and Kittering had seen in the draw below Rattlesnake the night the judge's body was found.

"What about the other?" Jim asked, when Holden had finished. "What's between Kittering and Hugh Allard that keeps Kittering from fightin' this thing?"

"The girl," Fats answered bluntly.

"What girl?"

"Ann Allard. She's Miles' daughter, not Allard's."

Jim's look was a puzzled one. He waited for Holden to add to what

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he'd said. When the explanation didn't come, he drawled, "That doesn't make sense."

Holden slowly moved his head in a negative. "No. But I don't have the right to say more. It's Miles' business. You wanted the reason for his not havin' a backbone. There it is."

JIM hunkered down on his heels and built a smoke, passing the makings across to Fats. Finally the latter said, "What comes next? We're back where we started."

Jim shook his head. "Not quite. There's Spade Deshay."

"What about Deshay?" Fats' look sharpened.

"Didn't you know he'd drifted in?"

"The devil you say!"

Jim waited a moment. Then: "Mean anything to you?"

"It could," Holden admitted.

"Spade's bought a hand in this or he wouldn't be here," Jim said. "I intend to find out what he's in it for."

"How'll you set about it?"

Jim shifted his position until his back was to the trunk of the pine. He glanced on past Fats and up along the reaching heights where the dark green of pine and cedar gave way to a lighter blanket of aspen edging the boulder fields below the gaunt peaks. "See if I've got this right, Holden. There are a hundred places up there where a bunch of men could hide as long as they wanted, aren't there?"

"Long enough to raise grandchildren," Fats agreed.

"Years back," Jim continued, "I traveled with Spade. I know his habits. Unless I'm way wrong, the man you saw with that herd the other night works for Spade."

Holden was frowning. "I see part of it, not the rest," he drawled. "Deshay has been in everything from raiding bullion shipments to rustling, hasn't he? You figure he's driving off Circle A's beef?"

"I think he's been hired to drive it off."

The nut brown of Holden's thin face deepened a shade in anger. "Get this straight, Friend Jim," he drawled. "All Kittering wants is to be let alone. There wouldn't be any point in his throwing in with Deshay against Allard."

"But there would be a point to Allard hiring his own stuff driven off so he could blame it on Kittering—if he wanted Kittering run out of the country."

Holden's anger left him at once. "The hell you say!" he breathed. Then a doubt came to his thin face. He shook his head. "It don't hold water. Kittering never made trouble for Allard."

"Then it must be he wants Kittering's layout."

"Why?"

Jim lifted his wide shoulders in a shrug.

Holden went on, "Allard never needed that graze. There's something else behind it."

"And maybe Spade could help us find what it is."

Holden laughed softly. "You just agreed it'd take a man half his life to comb these hills and find a hideout. You're back where you started."

Jim frowned at the interruption, went on, "If I'm right, if Allard is working with Spade, he must have a man to keep in touch with the hideout. Give Allard a reason for wanting to send word to Spade about something, and that man will lead us up there."

"What kind of a reason?"

"How many men of Kittering's could be trusted to help us run off

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a small bunch of Circle A stuff and keep quiet about it afterward?" Jim asked.

Holden smiled at what he saw was coming. He thought a moment. "Ed Beeson and Johnny Dawes. I wouldn't trust Mule Evans on a thing like this. But Miles would never stand for it!"

"Don't tell him then."

HOLDEN'S wide mouth slowly shaped a wry grin. "It listens good, Jim. We could do it tonight. I'd have to make some excuse to send Mule away. Tomorrow the two of us could wait in that timber behind Allard's layout and spot whoever rides out—if anyone is goin' to. The thing I don't quite get is what good it'll do us when you do run onto Deshay."

"Throw a scare into him."

"How?"

"Can the station agent down at Sands be trusted to do a job for us?" Jim asked in seeming irrelevance.

Holden frowned his puzzlement at the question, finally shook his head. "Hugh Allard got him his job."

"Then where else could we go to send a wire?"

"There's a way station a few miles south. I know the operator. Did him a favor once."

"Then let's get down there," Jim said, rising.

Fats, still squatting on his heels, looked up with a narrow-lidded gaze. "Why? What's this got to do with throwin' a scare into Deshay?"

"I think I know how we can do it. I'll have to get a couple of wires off first, though."

Still the Block K man hesitated, in a plain invitation for Jim to share whatever thought was running through his mind. But Jim gave no sign of telling what it was and presently, with a meager shrug of his narrow shoulders, Fats said, "I reckon you know what you're doin'."

"How about that empty gut of yours?" he asked, sauntering over to his pony. "We've got some miles to cover if we hit that way station."

"You can pack me out some grub and a razor from Kittering's tonight," Jim answered, already in the saddle and obviously impatient to be on the move.

Holden didn't know what this was adding up to as they struck down out of the hills obliquely south and west so as to avoid Sands. But he had enough confidence in Jim after their brief talk to be willing to do almost anything his new partner suggested. He was also reluctant and a little too proud, after that first refusal of Jim's, to ask any further questions about their errand.

Later, though, as they worked out of the hills and onto the flats south of Sands, Fats' curiosity almost got the best of him. But a deeply ingrained patience restrained him. He decided that Jim had some good reason for keeping his mouth shut after that cryptic mention of wanting to send some wires.

Whenever the opportunity was offered, his glance would come around and study Jim. His lacking in respect for the name of Allard made him wonder at his readiness to trust it now. He saw something ironical in that and time and again the thought twisted his long face into a wry smile. Yet in Jim he had recognized qualities he envied and admired. It had taken a good brain to plan that business of hurrahing Kittering's cabin last night. That same brain was working at another idea now. Fats was willing to let it work.

In this last hour, since meeting up with Jim, the tall man had, for

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the first time in weeks, lost his feeling of helplessness and near despair. This waiting around for something to happen was at an end, or so his hunch told him. This Jim Allard, he realized, didn't wait for things to happen. He made them happen.

ONLY at two o'clock, when they were riding on across the bare treeless flat toward the red and yellow-painted way station of the Sierra & Western, their dust fogging around them in a following hot wind, did Holden break the silence that had held during their fast ride.

"What's the set-up here, Jim?" he asked.

"The sheriff sent us out here. I'm a friend of yours."

Holden had to be satisfied with that. They left the horses in the shade along the east wall of the shack and were approaching the door on that side when it swung open on a bald man wearing bib overalls and no shirt. His glance clung suspiciously to Jim for a moment, taking in his unshaven face and the brown stain of dried blood on his shirt sleeve. Then he looked at Holden, saw who it was, and grinned. "Long time no see, Fats. You ain't growed that double chin yet."

"Can't say the same for you, Joe," Fats replied. He nodded to indicate Jim. "Friend of mine wants to send some telegrams."

"Step right in," Joe said, more genial now that Jim's status had been clearly defined. Evidently any friend of Holden's was acceptable.

The shack was empty except for some packing boxes in a far corner, a cot and a table under the window that faced the tracks. On the table was a telegraph instrument and above it the levers of a semaphore. Joe found a pad of telegraph forms, wiped the dust from it on the seat of his pants, and handed it and a pencil to Jim.

While Jim wrote, Fats and Joe chinned in the way of old acquaintances long separated and picking up the thread of their lives casually where it had broken off. Finished, Jim tore off the two forms he had used and said to Joe:

"Fred Blythe sent us out here to get these off because he didn't want the whole town to know about it. Fats says you'll keep it under your hat."

Joe's face gathered seriously. "Fats don't say much a man can swallow without a hell of a lot o' salt, mister. But this time he's correct."

Jim nodded. "Another thing. Burn these when you're through. In a day or two someone may be along wantin' to know who wired this Pierce. You'd be doin' Fats and Fred Blythe a favor by sayin' that a Circle A rider sent it. Don't say what the wire was about, just say Allard's name was signed to it."

Joe sent a look at Holden. "That right, Fats?"

"That's the way we'd like it, Joe." Fats nicely concealed his growing bewilderment.

"Then that's the way it'll be," the operator told him.

JIM held out the telegrams to Fats. "See if I've remembered everything."

Holden looked at them. The first was to the Denver office of the Sierra & Western Railway. When he'd read it, Fats looked up and nodded.

The second held his attention much longer. It was addressed to Virgil Pierce, Globe, Arizona. It read:

JIM ALLARD INVOLVED IN KILLING HERE AT SANDS. OFFER YOU

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Continued from page 102

PERSONAL GUARANTEE OF TWO THOUSAND DOLLARS FOR HIS CAPTURE DEAD OR ALIVE. IMPERATIVE YOU AVOID SHERIFF AND KEEP BUSINESS STRICTLY TO YOURSELF. HUGH ALLARD.

Fats gulped and didn't raise his glance until he had enough control of his face to hide his surprise. He didn't look at Jim but handed the telegrams across to the agent, saying, "How much, Joe?"

He paid for the messages after Joe had read them and commented, "A devil of a mess Fred Blythe's in! Wish I could help him."

"You're helpin' him now," Jim told him.

They were half a mile back along the trail that followed the glistening and heat-shimmering twin ribbons of steel before Fats trusted himself to speak.

"Why the devil do you want to bring that bounty hunter in here to nail up your hide? Virgil Pierce! Man, he doesn't know what it means to quit!"

Jim answered that at some length, telling Holden how he planned to use Pierce. His explanation failed to relieve his companion's grave, worried expression.

"I can see that," Holden said when Jim had finished. "But why not really get him in here after Deshay—after any one but you?"

"He's tackled Deshay before. Spade never traveled alone, never gave Pierce an even chance at him. And Pierce never crowds his luck. He wouldn't come here just to hunt Deshay."

Holden swore under his breath, time and again. "You're dealin' from a five-ace deck, Jim. Here's hoping they don't catch you at it!"

"Here's hopin' they don't." Jim spoke solemnly, meaning it, for he had no illusions in having sent that telegram.

CHAPTER XI

OUTLAW'S HIDE-OUT

AT dawn next morning Jim Allard was looking down on Circle A's headquarters from the margin of the trees on the hill slope behind the huge galvanized watering tank above the barn. Ten hours of sleep, a shave and two full meals, had wiped out his weariness of yesterday and given him back his old restless driving energy. Making the long circle that brought him up here while it was still dark, he'd taken the time to strip and bathe in a pool along Antelope Creek. The icy water had been a tonic that now made him restless to see the beginnings of his plan take shape.

Last night Holden and two of his men had set out late to strike at a herd in one of Circle A's outlying meadows. This morning, if things went according to schedule, Fats would be in town to make sure that Virgil Pierce arrived on the nine o'clock local. Jim was wishing now that he could have word of Pierce's arrival. Everything depended on the ex-marshal's being in Sands immediately.

But there was gambling blood in him, and he was willing to take the risk of assuming that Pierce would come. This was like a game of draw poker with wild cards to be drawn. He was willing to take his chances on the cards he would draw and outbet the other players.

An hour after he began his vigil above Circle A, the breakfast clanging of the iron triangle at the cook shanty below signaled the exact instant things began to happen. As the crew gathered for the meal, a

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rider ran his horse hell for leather down the hill trail to the south of Jim's lookout. Once on the flat below, the man ignored corrals and crew's quarters and streaked in through the cottonwoods toward the big sprawling house. He slid his pony to a quick stop, came down out of the saddle and ran in through the patio gate. Jim couldn't see what door of the house he entered.

A minute dragged by; another. Suddenly the man appeared beyond the gate again. Trent Harms was with him. The Circle A foreman hurried across to the corrals, had a man catch up and saddle a horse for him. Then he and the rider who had come in left the layout. They took the trail back up the hill. Jim gave them two mintues' start, then walked back to get the claybank and followed.

It was easy to keep them in sight. The hollows between the hills were open and grassy, only the hill crests timbered. Jim rode carefully but fast, for they were wasting no time. Within two miles of Circle A, they separated, Harms keeping at a trot to the faintly marked trail that led to the higher foothills, his crewman striking off southward, fast. It was obvious that the latter's errand was urgent.

JIM chose to follow Harms. Two hours later, after keeping his quarry in sight the whole time and wondering at Harms' irritatingly slow pace, Jim saw the ramrod swing obliquely south and east. Presently, a quarter mile ahead, Harms rode up on Circle A's south fence. He followed it until he came to a gate. There he came aground tied his pony, and hunkered down with his back to a fence post and lit a smoke. Jim watched from a timbered crest a quarter mile away.

He waited there a full forty minutes and was deciding he'd followed the wrong man when abruptly the rider who had been with Harms appeared from out of the trees on the other side of the fence. He had another man with him, a man on a buckskin. The buckskin was vaguely familiar to him; he finally remembered seeing the animal two days ago as he and Ann were climbing the trail out of the badlands to Circle A's mesa.

"Kittering man," he said aloud, remembering what the girl had told him that afternoon.

The two riders came on through the gate and spent a few minutes talking to Harms. Then once again Jim had to make a choice. The rider on the buckskin struck off immediately toward the higher hills to the east while Harms and his crewman headed back the way Harms had come. Jim finally followed the man on the buckskin, for this rider was going toward the hills and it was up there somewhere that he expected to find Spade Deshay.

Luck was with him. The buckskin's rider was in a hurry and didn't once use the precaution of climbing a high point and scanning his back trail. He covered six twisting, climbing miles the first forty minutes and finally rode out of sight into the brush-choked mouth of a canyon whose course Jim could follow high toward the peaks. A stream, the beginning of Antelope, it looked like, struck down out of the canyon and made a snaking course across a wide rolling meadow.

Jim was wary about following the buckskin into the brush at the canyon mouth, warier still about riding on. He didn't go ahead until he had carefully studied the ground that lay ahead. But the canyon

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was fairly wide and he swung far aside from a faintly marked trail wherever he couldn't see what lay fifty yards ahead. The walls climbed to a surprising height in a very short distance and held their sheerness even more sharply as he went on. The stream's roaring rush down over its rocky bed served to blanket out the sound of the claybank's shoes striking the bare rock over the long grassless stretches.

Now he had to go on by feel alone, since the rider on the buckskin was well out of sight. He took his time, to, knowing that to hurry might end any chance he had of going deep in here without being discovered. The sun was obscured by the high walls but the shadows far up along the walls told him it was already long past midday.

He judged he had covered better than ten miles of the canyon alone when, abruptly, scanning a far-climbing reach directly ahead, he saw a moving splotch of color that made him rein back into a tall stand of cedar and behind a high rock shoulder close in to the left wall. From there, his hand holding down the claybank's nose, he watched the rider on the buckskin go back down the canyon. Whatever errand Kittering's man had come here on was evidently now finished. He wasn't in any particular hurry now, either, for he was holding the buckskin down to a leisurely walk.

THE rider passed close enough for Jim to get a brief but good look at him. Jim caught a picture he knew he would never forget. The man's face was young, sallow, stamped with rash arrogance; and the thin-lipped mouth was drawn to a straight, somehow cruel-looking line odd in a man so young. He wore his gun low and that, added to the light-skinned and supple hands, gave Jim the instant impression that this youth could be dangerous. The last fleeting glimpse he had of the buckskin showed him a jaw brand burned in the shape of a crude square inclosing the letter K. Block K! Here was his proof of Holden's hunch. This must be Mule Evans, the man Holden hadn't dared trust last night when the Circle A herd was driven off.

Jim was glad he had traveled slowly this last hour. Evans had gone on fast, completed his errand and turned back. This meant only one thing to Jim: that Spade Deshay's hide-out, if the hide-out was where Evans had been, must lie close ahead.

When he went on, Jim no longer made any attempt to go quietly or unseen. He struck across to the narrow trail and followed it openly, whistling a tune loudly enough to be heard over the rush of water in the stream. Somewhere up here, Spade would have a guard posted. Jim wanted that guard to see him. Or perhaps his guess that Spade was in hiding up here was wrong. In that case, his ride had been for nothing.

It happened a bare quarter hour after Evans had passed Jim on the way out. He was riding through a narrowing of the canyon's deep gloom when the stallion's ears lifted and the animal whickered. Suddenly a voice spoke from the direction of a high outcropping:

"This is as far as she goes, stranger!"

Jim reined in. A brief silence followed. Then the voice exploded: "By damn, look who's here!" There was a pause long enough for Jim to remember whom that voice

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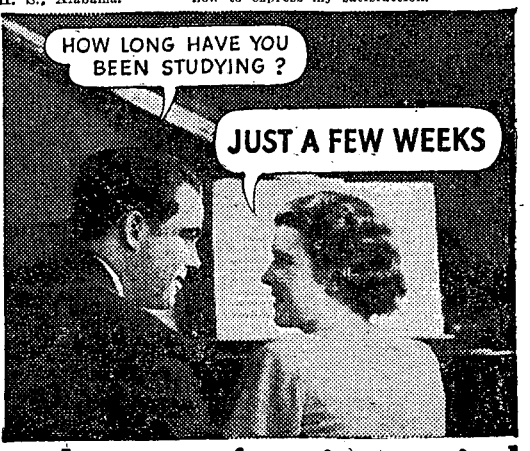

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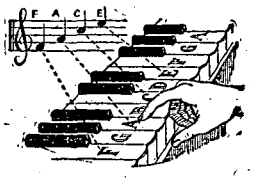

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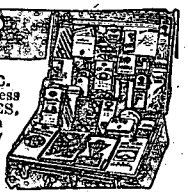

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Continued from page 106

belonged to. Then: "Shuck out the irons, Jim! Spade's goin' to love this!"

Jim unhesitatingly dropped his belts and guns to the ground. Off to his left there was a rustling of the bushes fronting the outcrop. The branches of an oak thicket parted and a short, bowlegged man with a rifle hung in the crook of his arm led a sorrel horse from cover.

"Howdy, Two Card," Jim drawled, a broad smile coming to his bronzed face.

For a moment they sized each other up, these men who hadn't met for several years. Two Card Bates was heavy-set, gray-haired and his loose-joweled face fatter than Jim remembered it. Only the pale-blue, quick eyes gave hint of the shrewdness and cunning gathered from a past as an unsuccessful gambler. His name came from his habit of never drawing more nor less than two cards in a game of draw poker. Evidently his peculiar system lacked something, for Jim had never seen him with a lot of money. He was Spade Deshay's lieutenant, loyal, unfriendly.

"You're awful sure of yourself!" Two Card drawled.

"Goin' to take me on in?"

"I'm sure as hell not goin' to turn you loose!" The outlaw made a motion on up the trail. "You first." He stooped and picked up Jim's guns.

JIM went on, hearing the turf-deadened footfalls of Two Card's pony close behind. The muscles along his spine crawled at the knowledge of the gun back there and the memory of an incident not calculated to make Two Card very friendly toward him.

It wasn't more than a dozen rods farther along a narrow aisle of stately cedars until Jim sighted

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through the trees a sod-roofed shack and a pole corral squatting close to the banks of the stream in a grassy clearing. Riding into the edge of the clearing, Two Card whistled a shrill signal. The shack's door swung open and a man stepped out of it.

Three strides beyond the door the man stopped abruptly, erect. He cocked his arms slightly to bring his hands closer to his guns. Two men came to stand in the doorway behind him. Seeing his abrupt halt, and the subtle signal of his hands, they stood where they were, sensing the same thing in his attitude that struck Jim so forcibly.

The glance of the man in the yard took in Jim leisurely. He saw Jim's empty waist and drawled, almost pleasantly, "Two Card, give him back his irons!"

"Not until you've heard me out, Spade," Jim said, and put the claybank across the open stretch toward Deshay.

He came down out of the saddle barely ten feet from the outlaw, seeing the half smile on Deshay's handsome face. "I'm here to do you a favor, Spade," he went on, "in return for one you'll do me."

Spade Deshay was mild-looking, deceptively so. Standing no taller than Jim's shoulder, his handsome, dark-eyed face gave him the look of a dapper, almost effeminate man. His pants were of tan whipcord, close-fitting, and his boots and holsters were polished, fancy-stitched. He wore his guns butt foremost, high at his waist. He made a strange neat figure in this rough mountain hide-out.

Jim had no illusions about Deshay, particularly about his ability with his guns. Several men who had taken exception to the outlaw's looks and given way to their curiosity over the seemingly awkward way he wore his guns were now dead, brought down by those same awkwardly placed .45s. Although Jim had no fear of the man, he had long ago learned a lasting respect for him.

Just now Spade drawled, "You have a habit of doin' me favors. Such as that time in Cimarron."

One of the men in the doorway behind Spade laughed softly, mockingly.

"That's water over the dam, Spade," Jim said. "I tried to take your bunch away from you, you tried to frame me for it. Neither one worked. Let's bury the hatchet."

"And last night?" Spade went on inscrutably.

"I had to find you. Givin' a man an excuse for coming up here so I could follow him was the surest way."

The surface coolness of the outlaw's manner broke at this bland admission. Now his eyes for the first time reflected his inward anger. "You'll take your irons and make your try, friend!" he drawled. "Either that or I'll—"

"Damn it!" Jim cut in sharply. "Will you listen? I'm here to tell you you're being sold out, double-crossed! We'll settle this any way you like, later. But right now I need you and you sure as hell need me!"

The intentness of his words blanked out the anger on the outlaw's face. "Go on," he said. "It'd better be good."

"It is. Hugh Allard's sold you down the river."

Spade smiled. "He couldn't. I've never laid eyes on him."

"Harms, then."

Spade shook his head, seeming to

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relish Jim's attempts. "Him either. Go ahead."

"Then Mule Evans."

WARINESS edged Spade's glance instantly. "What about Mule?"

Jim knew the man well enough to realize that Mule Evans' name was the only one that meant anything to him. All at once he saw that he had so far missed a point of vital importance. He was voicing it immediately. "Spade, don't you know you're workin' for Hugh Allard?"

"Am I?"

"You are. Trent Harms is Allard's right bower. He sent Evans up here this morning. I saw him do it."

Momentarily unconcealed surprise showed on the outlaw's face. Then he laughed softly. "I should worry about Mule and who pays him. If it's Allard instead of Kittering, it's all the same to me. But how do you tie into this?"

"I'm with Kittering. I'm for him because Hugh Allard brought me in here and offered me big money to bushwhack him. I'm for him because I hate Allard's gall."

"Gall seems to run in the Allard family," was Spade's casual rejoinder.

It was obvious that Spade neither knew nor cared whom he worked for, that his profit out of the stolen beef was all that interested him. For a moment Jim was at a loss and insisted subbornly, "Allard's hirin' you, through Evans, to run off his own stuff so that he can hang it on Kittering."

"Nice set-up," Spade agreed. "I'd like to meet this Hugh Allard. Him and me could do big things together."

Jim had a sudden inspiration that made his say, "You'll never get to meet him, Spade. Fact is, you won't be able to meet anyone in a couple of days."

"Take your guns and back that, Jim!" Spade's anger once more cut loose.

Jim ignored the invitation. "You won't be able to because of Virgil Pierce."

"Pierce!"

Spade's voice grated out that one word viciously. He eyed Jim with suspicion, his anger gone. "What about Pierce?"

"He's down in Sands. Allard sent for him. He's here to get you, Spade."

"Why me? Why not you?"

"No one knows I'm still in the country. I was framed with a murder two nights ago. Allard thinks I've hightailed."

Spade smiled without amusement. "I heard about that." Abruptly he seemed to remember the other thing and his smooth manner left him. "How the hell do I know you aren't runnin' a sandy?"

"You don't. But you can prove it. I still say you've been workin' for Allard, that he's through with you now and that he's brought Pierce in here to hunt you down. Spade, you're being double-crossed."

"Prove that and I'll—"

Spade didn't finish what he'd started to say, but Jim's hunch was that he had finally succeeded in centering the outlaw's anger where he wanted it—on Hugh Allard.

"Look, Spade," he said, as though explaining something extremely simple to an understanding child. "You've been in this thing how long? Six months?"

"Five."

"All right. In that time, you've helped Allard in a big way, helped him in this play he's makin' against

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Kittering, who wouldn't lift a hand against anyone. The thing's done now, Allard's ready for the wind-up. But there are certain men who've helped him. Mule Evans is one. You're another. Do you think he's going to have you around when it's over to blackmail him?"

Spade was sober now, listening intently. He said finally, "Blackmail? Who said I'd—" He saw the full import of Jim's words and broke off abruptly.

"See what I mean? You're dangerous to Allard once he's swung this thing his way. So he's got Pierce in here to take care of you and—"

"You said you could prove that! How?"

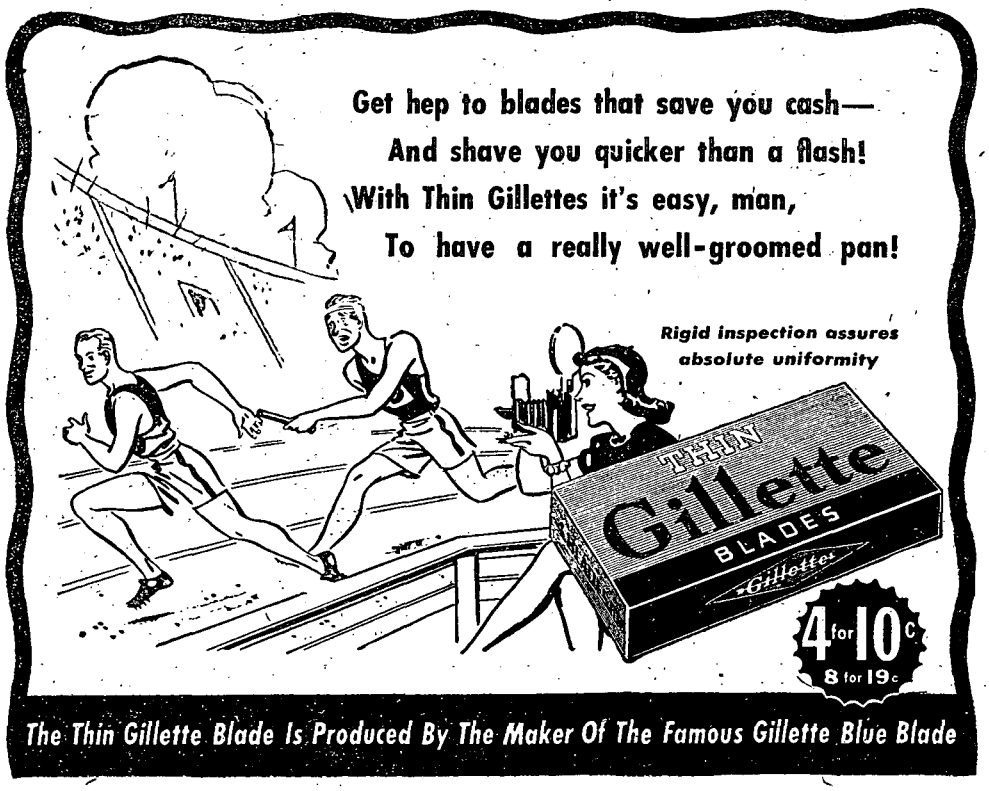
"It was two days ago that Hugh Allard made me his proposition to go after Kittering. Up until then he had no need for Pierce. If I'd done the Kittering job, he'd have put me out after you next. But I didn't want to play his game. So he framed me, got me out of the way—or so he thinks. He had to think of another way of getting you. It would take a man who's plenty good with his irons. He thought of Virgil Pierce and probably wired him to come the night he got rid of me."

"That's a guess. That doesn't prove a thing."

"Go on down to Sands and see if Pierce isn't there."

"That still doesn't prove who he's here after."

"Then go to the telegraph office and look over the wires that have been sent the last few days. If you don't find it there, hit the way stations along the line. Allard wouldn't



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have had the time to send a letter. And he might be too smart to rig something like this from town."

SPADE stood a moment in concentrated thought. His glance jerked up to Jim finally and he said in a barely audible voice: "You're stayin' with me until I get this thing straight, friend Jim. If what you say holds water, I reckon I'll have to pay a call on this Hugh Allard!"

He turned abruptly and jerked his head to the two men in the doorway. "Get ready to ride!" Then, glancing at Two Card: "Keep him covered!" He disappeared inside the cabin as his men came out and headed for the corral.

They set out from the cabin minutes later with Spade in the lead, Jim followed by Two Card and the other pair of riders. It went unsaid that any attempt of Jim's to change this line-up would meet with quick suspicion, maybe a bullet in the back.

As the miles dropped behind them and the sun lowered farther along its wide arc to the western horizon, Jim wondered if he was crowding his luck too closely. Spade was unpredictable. Yet Jim knew that the outlaw, once convinced that he had been tricked into working for Hugh Allard and that Allard was about to get rid of him, would hate the Circle A owner for the deception he had used. Unscrupulous though he was, Spade Deshay's code was based on a few essential honesties, one of which was that he tolerated no double-dealing in a confederate. Jim, in his wilder days, had once aspired to make an under-strapper of Spade, to take leadership of the wild bunch. Deshay had rebelled at that, had framed him and threatened a shootout if they ever met again. Now they had met. It was going to take some maneuvering to

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keep that shootout from happening.

That galling memory might even now bear enough weight with Spade to make him throw in with Allard out of sheer spite. Jim had played a long shot in bringing Virgil Pierce in here, a long shot intended to bring Spade in on Kittering's side and even the balance in men and guns.

There still remained the problem of prodding Kittering into this thing, of angering him so violently that he would thrust aside caution and decide to fight Allard tooth and nail. But winning Spade's confidence came first.

CHAPTER XII

AMBUSHED!

YEARS of incautious living had prompted in Mule Evans wary habits as strong as his never going without guns. Scanning the trails he rode had become second nature to him, as much a habit as the precaution he took of never letting a law officer get a close look at his face.

Two miles below Deshay's cabin, his unthinking scrutiny of the trail suddeny showed him something that tuned him to an instant's high-pitched tenseness. It laid his right hand low along his thigh, close to holster.

Coming in here less than an hour ago, he hadn't seen the sign now clearly imprinted in the thin top soil that lay over the canyon's rocky bed. There had been sign, that of the coming and going of Deshay's men, but not this one of a pony with right front shoe toed in slightly in an inordinately long stride. That sign went up canyon. It meant only one thing to Mule. He had been followed in here!

His first precaution was to ride in behind the screening branches of a tall cedar, where he could see both ways and have the solid security of the canyon's sheer-climbing wall at his back. There, held by a panic brought on by the chance of a shot echoing out any instant to slam a bullet into him, he considered what he must do.

He could go back and warn Deshay; but that, he decided, would take him directly into the hands of the man who had followed him in here. The other possibility, that of riding to Circle A and warning Allard, was the one he chose.

Mule Evans was at heart a coward, one who hid behind a quick temper and an uncommon adeptness of hand to gun. The ride down the canyon, where each hundred yards held a dozen threats of ambush, was sheer torture to him. He punished the buckskin, running him recklessly over uneven, steeply down-pitched ground. Once clear of the canyon mouth and in the broad meadow that fronted it, he used his sharp-roweled spurs cruelly each time the animal lagged from a full-out run.

When he vaulted from the saddle at Circle A's patio gate, the buckskin was down-headed and badly lathered, every muscle trembling. Mule tried the office first, and was lucky. Hugh Allard and Trent Harms were there.

Allard's sharp-featured face mirrored instant anger when he saw who had opened the door. His voice intoned flatly, "I thought I told you never to come here!"

"I had to, Allard," Mule cut in quickly. "Someone followed me in to Deshay's this mornin'. I picked up his jughead's sign. Right front toed in, long stride—"

"That claybank! Jim Allard's!"

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Trent Harms breathed, barely audibly but with an insistency that brought both men's attention swinging around on him.

"Say that again, Trent," Allard drawled.

Harms nodded. "It's the claybank all right." He smiled crookedly. "I should know. I took Eaton out there and showed him the sign before I put him out after Allard the other afternoon."

It took Hugh Allard barely two seconds to realize fully the implications behind the news Mule had brought. Coming up out of his chair, he said, "How long since you left Deshay, Evans?"

"Not over forty minutes. I mighty near killed a horse gettin' here."

"Trent, get Red and Daniels and Tellew," Allard ordered. "They're to bring rifles! Saddle Evans a fresh horse!"

"What's comin' off, boss?" Harms asked, on the way to the door.

"We're going up there and catch them on the way out. Another thing. Get Evans' horse away from the house. If Ann should see—" Allard left the thought unfinished. Mule and Harms left the room.

A smug smile betrayed itself on Hugh Allard's face as he removed his coat and strapped on a pair of shoulder holsters. His thin hands deftly opened the loading gates and inspected the cylinders of a matched pair of pearl-handled guns before he thrust them into holsters. Then, coat on again, he went out the door.

"Dad!"

ANN'S call stopped Hugh halfway to the patio gate. He turned toward the door of the huge big center room of the house, asking gruffly, "What is it?"

"I want to talk to you," Ann said, coming out the door and standing at the edge of the flagstones of the *portal*. She had hardly laid eyes on him in the past two days.

"I haven't the time now," Hugh said impatiently. "Im—"

"You never have the time," the girl interrupted.

A warning note in her voice made Allard control his impatience. He could see that her deep, hazel eyes were examining him critically, almost in the way they would a stranger. It was a cold regard, a close one.

He walked over to her. "Sorry, Ann. These last few days have set me on edge."

"That's exactly what I want to talk about. What's happening here, Hugh?"

There were rare times when Ann called him by his given name to his face. It was always when she was angry or hurt and now he had an added warning from that. She suspected him, was judging him, and he was careful about his reply:

"I wish I knew, girl," he said in kindly tones. "Another herd went last night. We're going out now to make a try at finding it."

"What about Eaton, the man you hired last week, Hugh? I saw him the other evening when his horse packed him in. He was dead. Who killed him?"

Hugh Allard's expression became pious, grave. He knew, of course, that Jim Allard had killed Eaton. But now the chance of planting a seed for thought in Ann's mind was too open to be ignored. "We don't know," he said. "He was riding the east fence that afternoon."

The girl's oval face paled a shade. "That's what Trent said. You can't think a Kittering man shot him."

He shrugged offhandedly and reached out and took her by the

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arms. "Let's don't think about it. I'll have to go now. See you at supper." He gripped her arms tightly in what he meant to be a reassuring way and turned and started across the patio, stepping around the down-hanging branches of the willow.

"Hugh!"

Once again Ann's voice stopped him. This time it was she who came out to him. She looked up into his face with a troubled expression in her glance. "What did Jim Allard want here the other afternoon?"

He repeated the story he'd given Fred Blythe. "Offered to go out and pick a fight with Miles Kittering and kill him, for a price. He'd heard I was in trouble and thought he saw a way of making some easy money."

A hint of stronger anger, then of amusement rode into the girl's expression. "Is that the truth, Hugh?" she asked in a low voice.

"Of course it's the truth," he flared, realizing instantly that he had failed to disguise his anger as was his habit.

"He . . . this Jim Allard is the one who murdered that railroad man in town two nights ago, isn't he?"

Hugh nodded curtly. "Shot him in the back."

"Why, Hugh?"

"How do I know why! He did it, that's all!" He was finding these insistent questions a little disconcerting and spoke irritably again.

He caught that same shadow of a smile on her face as she turned from him and walked back to the *portal*, saying only, "I wanted to know what you thought, Hugh." She was gone a moment later, the door closing behind her. Hugh Allard would have liked to say something to stop her, to keep her with him until he could read the meaning behind her smile. But, for once, he was caught unprepared and didn't speak. He turned and went out the patio gate, angry and more than a little puzzled over Ann's strange behavior. It was as though she hadn't believed him, what he said about Jim Allard. What it was she hadn't believed he couldn't decide.

WITHIN a dozen strides he had forgotten Ann in his eagerness to get on with this job. The news Mule had brought him had seemed bad at first. Now he would put this daring play of Jim Allard's to his own use. What Jim had done was plain enough. Jim and Deshay had once traveled together. Somehow, Jim had learned that Spade was in the country. He'd seen through the thin fabric of Kittering's being blamed for stealing the Circle A herds and rightly guessed that Spade was behind it. Last night's raid in Circle A's upper meadow had been only a ruse to send a man up after Spade.

Hugh saw that now and damned himself for being a gullible fool. He'd been taken in the same as the others. In fact, it was he who had ordered Harms this morning to send Mule up to Deshay's camp and find out the reasons for last night's play. He should have known that it was a trap set for him and ignored it.

But now that it was done, he would take advantage of it. By now Jim Allard had seen Spade and had probably told him a few things the outlaw wasn't aware of. Such as who he was really working for. This meant that Hugh had to act fast. These two, Spade and Jim, were dangerous to him now. He had nicely framed this thing on Miles Kittering. But Spade and Jim together would turn that against him —unless he could get rid of them.

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If he acted fast, if he'd been wise in hiring these new gun hands, neither Jim nor Spade would be alive two hours from now. With Jim and Spade out of the way, he might even use them to further his case against Kittering.

Fred Blythe might believe a story something like this: that Circle A men had followed the stolen herd last night, caught up with it, and that there had been a shootout in which Jim and Deshay had been cut down. That would throw the blame clearly on Kittering. It would also necessitate getting the herd back. After that, it would be a simple matter to make things too hot for Kittering to stay in this country.

AT the corrals where the others, horses saddled, were waiting for him, Allard told his foreman, "Trent, I want every man, even the cook, to get up to that break in the south fence. I don't want 'em back here until they've found that herd and pushed it inside our wire again." He was acting on the hunch that the herd wouldn't have been driven far, since the purpose of the theft was now accomplished.

Harms walked over to the bunkhouse to give his orders. He was back in two minutes. They climbed into leather and took the trail that led into the hills rising abruptly from Circle A's broad mesa.

The sight of Hugh Allard's grimly set face, the bulge of the guns beneath the coat he always wore even on the hottest days, caused an exchange of glances between the three new men the rancher had selected to take along. These three, Red, Daniels and Tellew, not regular members of Circle A's crew but men hired by Harms for a special purpose, realized that after drawing high wages and doing nothing for almost a full month they were about to be called on to earn their pay. The trio had a certain quality in common, a set of countenance and a coldness of eye that was a tangible mark of their breed. All three wore a pair of guns apiece and carried Winchesters in scabbards on their saddles.

As they topped the crest of the hill behind the layout, Allard called, "Mule, get up here and show the way." Evans, on a fresh horse, went on ahead and set the pace.

The going was hard, mostly uphill, but Circle A's remuda boasted some good horseflesh and it counted now. Hugh Allard had the firm conviction that this period of endless planning and waiting for the flare-up was over. Now that things were shaping into action, he saw the end in sight. It might come today, tonight, tomorrow, and now he drove himself with all the stored-up bodily energy that had had no outlet these past weeks. There had been a time, long ago, when endless caution and waiting stolidly to achieve his ends had been as foreign to him as to this Jim Allard, whose violence of action and words had in three days blown things wide open. The chance that today, another hour, might definitely rid him of this bothersome relative made Allard drive all the harder.

Within sight of the canyon mouth in less than forty minutes, Allard called to Mule and reined in, letting his men come alongside. Over the sounds of the blowing animals and the creak of saddle gear, he scanned the half-mile of distance to the canyon mouth. He glanced upward at the sun, judging it to be close to four o'clock. Then, crisply, he gave his orders:

"Harms, you and Red and Tellew take the hill to this side of the stream.

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There's cover there, plenty of it. Mule and Daniels will work from these trees opposite. I'm going to make a cast across there and see if they've come out. If they have, I'll wave you down." He seemed to be thinking of something else. "I want Allard alive," he added. "Get the rest."

They split up immediately, Harms and his men striking straight in for the steep hill to the south of the canyon mouth that climbed precipitously to form one wall farther in. Mule and Daniels swung wide of the mouth, keeping their distance until they were above it before they rode in toward the trees on the far side of the stream. Allard headed straight in to the stream.

They saw him ride carefully along it and into the tall growth of cedar and brush that marked the beginnings of the canyon. Before he reappeared, they were in their places, their ponies tied far enough back to make sure they couldn't give warning before it was too late.

Hugh Allard, coming into sight again, looked left and right. Then he put his gelding across the stream and into the trees to the north.

After that, for an interminable twenty minutes, the men along the slope saw no sign of life either in the trees or along the stream. Finally, down there, a doe jumped lightly from cover in the brush choking the canyon mouth. She stood poised on the stream bank, head lifted, scenting the breeze. All at once two bounds took her back into the brush again; not directly, for she swung to the far side before disappearing. Then she was in sight a last time, climbing a ledge

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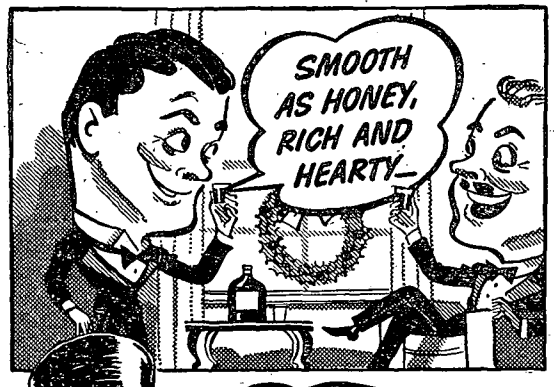

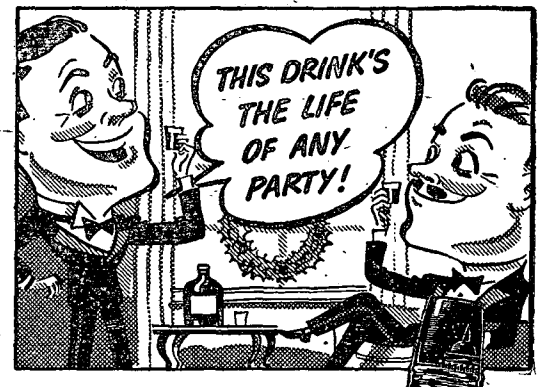

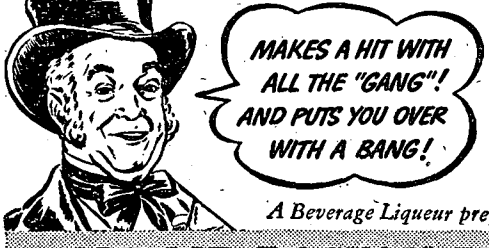

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that took her along the far talus slope and into the trees again.

"Nice shot," Tellew said to Harms, who was hunkered down behind a stunted piñon twenty feet to one side of him.

"You'll have better," Harms told him.

ALONG a falling bench of bare rock outcropping, a scant two hundred yards from the point where the canyon walls fell away into the wide meadow below, the stream boiled along its uneven channel with a roar amplified by the confining sheer walls to either side. From here, Jim could gaze out over the tops of the stately cedars at the canyon mouth and scan the far reaches of near desert that lay beyond the hills. There, straight into the west, was the line of the Sierra & Western right of way. Almost directly below was the gradual bend that ended the rails' long swing around the spur of mountains to the south.

Once again, Jim was struck by the thing that had caught his attention on that afternoon when he'd had his first glimpse of this country. This rugged and lofty spur of mountains, probably mothered by the distant and greater Rockies, had formed an obstacle man had disdained conquering in the laying of that long line of rail. Once again he was reminded of the waste in that far swing around the spur, waste in material and labor that had long ago been

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forgotten, waste in time that might some day count in the ever-pressing rush of increasing traffic and faster schedules.

Jim's mind was still engrossed in an idea that thought had given him when Spade led the way out of the trees and struck across the open meadow to leave the canyon behind. Jim lifted the claybank to a faster trot and came even with the outlaw, Two Card and his companions closing in behind.

Jim started to say, "Spade, what pass do you use crossing the peaks with the stuff you—"

Crack!

The sharp racketing explosion of a rifle shot cut in on his words. Behind, one of Two Card's partners cried hoarsely. Jim turned, instinctively raking the claybank's flanks with spurs. He was in time to see the man to Two Card's left fall loosely out of the saddle in a broken roll.

Spade bent low over his gelding's withers, putting the animal to a fast run. Jim was a scant twenty feet behind him, the claybank full out, when other rifles took up the fire of the first. The shots were ragged, untimed, and twice Jim felt the air whip struck up by lead close to his face.

Suddenly Spade's horse went down, forefeet first in a headlong roll that threw the rider far to one side. The claybank, drawing up on Spade, was too close to avoid hitting the down horse. Jim pulled sharply aside. He felt the claybank's front hoofs strike into the down horse, heard the animal's high-pitched scream of pain. Then he, too, was pitched from the saddle, unexpectedly, for he had thought the claybank clear.

He fell awkwardly, hitting hard on his left shoulder and sliding along on his left side with the uneven ground tearing at his shoulder. He rolled over before his skid was complete. The momentum of his fall snapped his head back so that it hit the ground in a hard blow to blind him with pain and dull his senses.

He lay there unable to move for long seconds, dimly aware of the racket of distant gunfire, the closer explosions of answering shots, the thudding hoof pound of running horses. His senses cleared gradually, and weakly, he pushed himself up. He was in time to see Spade Deshay's spare bulk swinging up into the claybank's saddle fifty yards away. The stallion wheeled nervously, rearing and shying over toward the spot where Jim lay. But sharp spurs drove him on. Spade followed Two Card, to disappear around the near bend of the hill to the south. In another ten seconds all that remained of their passing was the distance-muffled hoof drum of their fast running horses.

JIM stood up, shaking his head to clear it and steady his vision. Barely ten feet away lay Spade's horse, dead. Farther out a second animal was down on forelegs, trying to heave himself erect. Nearby lay the huddled shape of his rider, the first of the pair that had ridden with Two Card Bates. A hundred yards away, far out along the line of the stream, ran a riderless horse with trailing reins and empty swinging stirrups. Near the stream bank was a sprawled body that Jim decided must be the second rider who had sided Two Card out of the canyon.

He turned abruptly at the sound of a rifle shot that slapped out from the face of the hill. The wounded horse went down in a convulsive heave. Jim found himself staring at Trent Harms, who stood half a

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dozen yards away, his blunt face smiling mirthlessly, thumbs hooked over the hammers of two guns he held leveled.

"Bring a rope, Red," Harms called back over his shoulder. Then, to Jim: "Different than last time, eh, Allard?"

Jim didn't reply. By the time Harms and Red and Tellew had used a rope from one of their saddles to bind his arms securely to his sides, he was hearing the sound of horses coming up behind him. He turned and saw Allard, Mule Evans and a third man riding up from the creek.

Allard drew rein, eyed Jim impassively a moment, then asked Harms: "Deshay got away?"

Harms nodded, indicating Jim. "Deshay and one other."

"Red, go catch up that loose horse and bring him across here. We'll attend to the burying later." Allard came aground. He strode over and took Jim's guns from the saddle of Deshay's dead horse. Then he came up to Jim and for the first time his satisfaction betrayed itself in a meager smile that crossed his thin face.

"I told you to get out," he said tonelessly. "Now you're costing me the trouble of getting rid of you another way."

He turned and stood watching Red rope the bay horse whose rider lay near the stream bank. There was no talk while Red brought the horse up the incline toward the waiting group. Jim recognized how futile it would be to waste words now, how inevitable was the thing that he was sure was coming.

They lifted him into the saddle of the bay and roped his boots to the webbed-cotton cinch. They had started away from the stream, down across the high meadow where half a hundred sleek Circle A-branded steers were grazing, before Allard reined in alongside Jim to say, "Any luck with Deshay?"

"Enough," Jim replied.

His answer seemed to satisfy Allard, for the rancher went on ahead to ride alongside Harms. His silence was more condemning than any words could have been and Jim realized bitterly that now he might never know what happened to Miles Kittering, to Fats Holden and Spade, whether or not they made their fight and won or lost it. He had played a lone hand in this, a hand that had showed signs of being the winning one until a few minutes ago. But all that was gone up in gun smoke now, and ahead of him lay a payoff he had never let himself contemplate.

They had gone a long way on their ride back to Circle A when Jim turned to the rider alongside and asked, "How about a smoke?"

Hugh Allard must have heard, for his command came back sharply, "Stay away from him, Tellew!"

SPADE DESHAY accomplished two things in the three hours after the ambush. First, he proved wrong his suspicions that Jim had had a part in it with Hugh Allard. Four miles below the meadow where his two men lay dead, he had Two Card hold the claybank while he went down through the timber of a steep hill slope and hid close to the faint line of the trail leading back to Circle A's headquarters.

He was there when Hugh Allard and his men filed past. He saw Jim roped to the saddle, heard his ask for a smoke and caught Allard's curt order, "Stay away from him, Tellew!" Spade could see that whoever had roped Jim to the horse hadn't been over gentle about it, for

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Jim's face showed pain at each uneven stride of the horse. And Allard's smug satisfied smile at Jim's request for tobacco was further proof. No, Jim and Allard hadn't planned this together.

Second, much later, Spade made another discovery. Against Two Card's better judgment, Spade went brazenly in to the station at Sands. He bluntly asked the agent to see a copy of the telegram Hugh Allard had sent to Virgil Pierce either yesterday or the day before.

"Pierce?" The agent was obviously puzzled. "Where would the wire have gone? The name don't mean nothin'."

"Pierce is from Globe."

The agent shook his head positively. "It wasn't sent from here."

"Are you sure?"

The agent bridled. "I ought to know, hadn't I?"

So Spade and Two Card rode up on the way station below Sands at dusk. There, met by Joe's calm scrutiny from the doorway, Spade this time asked to see the file of telegrams.

"Never bother to keep 'em," said Joe, not at all impressed by the outlaw's looks. Then he happened to remember something and asked, "Which one you lookin' for?"

"The one Hugh Allard sent to a man by the name of Pierce," Spade told him.

Joe frowned, scratched his head and appeared to be trying to remember. All at once he seemed to, for his frown eased and he queried, "What about it?"

"When was it sent?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Who sent it?"

Joe remembered Fats' instructions. He shrugged off-handedly. "Couldn't tell you his name."

"Allard man?"

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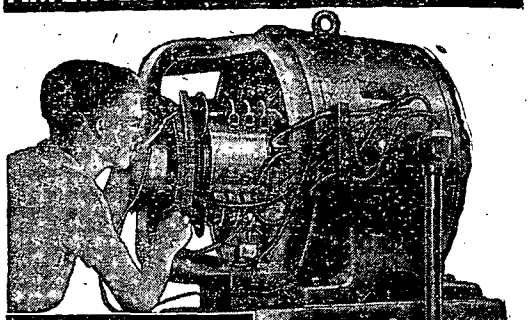

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"He was forkin' a Circle A jug-head."

A long slow sigh escaped Spade. He gave Two Card a look that was one of mixed relief and gravity. "Much obliged," he said to Joe, and turned back out the trail.

CHAPTER XIII

REUNION

ANN recognized Miles Kittering and Fats Holden coming up along the pasture in the gathering dusk and let out a sigh of real relief. She glanced at Johnny Dawes, who was working below her in Block K's big corral, and said, "Here they come."

"I knew they'd show up," Dawes told her. "Wouldn't 'a' kept you here two hours for nothin'."

Now that this meeting with Miles Kittering was at hand, Ann was unsure of herself. Enough had happened these past three days to unsettle her comparatively placid world. This afternoon, all at once sickened by anxiety and fear and the futility of trying to get any satisfaction from talking to Hugh or Trent, she had obeyed the impulse to leave the deserted Circle A and ride across and see Kittering.

Ann climbed down off the top pole of the corral, where she'd been watching Johnny work, and walked across to her buckskin, waiting there while Holden and Kittering rode in. As always, she felt an odd glow of pride at sight of Miles Kittering. He had a solid and honest look about him, a purposefulness that somehow awed, almost frightened her. Now, as he took in the buckskin and then recognized her,

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she saw his strange impassivity settle about him like a cloak.

He said solemnly, "Good evening, Ann," and swung ponderously from his saddle.

Fats Holden greeted her with, "Long time no see," reached for Kittering's reins and started leading the horses toward the corral gate.

Miles Kittering's reluctance to be alone with the girl was at once obvious as he said quickly, "Let Johnny turn 'em in, Fats." He waited until Holden had joined them again and nodded toward the cabin. "Let's go in. Had your supper, Ann?"

The girl nodded. "With Johnny, Miles." She could never quite bring herself to call him "father" or "dad." "I . . . I had to come over and see you."

KITTERING made no answer to that, and the three of them walked silently to the cabin, Holden going on ahead and calling in to the cook to dish up two plates of food. The only formality before they set about eating was to ask Ann to have a cup of coffee with them.

She took the crude bench at the far end of the table and purposely delayed telling Kittering what had brought her here, grimly relishing this postponement of trying for the answers to her questions Hugh Allard and Trent Harms had failed to give her. Finally, when Kittering pushed back his plate and took out his gnarled brier pipe and commenced filling it, she could stand the silence no longer.

"Miles," she said abruptly. "I heard guns in the hills on my way across here this afternoon. Hugh left earlier with half a dozen men. The rest of the crew drifted out later."

She didn't miss the significant, somewhat puzzled, look Kittering gave Holden and went on: "This morning there was another herd gone. That's where the crew is, looking for it."

Kittering nodded. Holden spoke for him. "We're just in from makin' our explanations to Fred Blythe, Ann."

"Where will this all end!" Ann breathed in sudden tenseness. "Where is it getting you, or Hugh, or any of us?"

"That's what we'd like to know," Kittering said gloomily. He felt for a match, found none, and held a burned stub over the lamp until it glowed redly and burst into flame. He lit his pipe, waved the match out, and added, "Ann, you have my word for it that I've had no hand in this."

"Then who has?" she asked helplessly. She saw that neither of them intended answering that, and went on, "Things I don't understand are going on over there. The day before yesterday one of Harms' new men came in roped to his saddle, dead. Hugh claims he was riding the east fence when he was killed."

"Meanin' we shot him?" Holden smiled wryly, slowly shaking his head.

"Then there was this Jim Allard," Ann continued, her words tumbling out in a rush to rid her mind of its torment. "He broke his parole and came here to make Hugh an offer of killing you, Miles, killing you for money. Hugh turned him down, had him thrown off the place."

"No one tosses Jim Allard around," Holden put in. "And that ain't the straight of the story."

His tone brought Ann's glance around to him. She said, intuitively, "You know something about him, Fats?"

He took a long moment in giving

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his slow nod. "A little," he drawled. Then, turning to Miles: "You still want to hire him?"

Before Kittering could reply, the girl cut in, "You mean you'd hire Jim Allard? That killer? He murdered that man at the hotel! He—"

"No, Ann," Holden interrupted quietly. "Jim was there, asleep in the next room. But he didn't kill Chalmers. He doesn't throw his lead at a man's back, ever. And he isn't a killer."

STRANGELY enough, Ann could find no reply. Deep down inside her had been a belief that this Jim Allard couldn't be the man Hugh claimed, and now a strange excitement and relief welled up in her.

Holden went on, "We can trust you not to spread this around, Ann. Jim hasn't left the country. He's here, trying to help Miles. Right now he's up there somewhere,"—he motioned vaguely in the direction of the peaks—"trying to sell Spade Deshay on the idea of slingin' in with us and whippin' this thing."

"You didn't tell me that!" Kittering boomed.

"No. It was agreed I shouldn't until the proper time, until Jim and I found a way of prodding you into this whether you wanted it or not."

"You say he's seeing Deshay? Trying to bring Deshay in this?"

Holden nodded. "To help you. Now maybe those guns in the hills mean something to you." He let his words have their effect on Kittering. Then he looked at the girl, noticing that the lamplight edged her shapely chestnut head in fine-spun threads of copper and laid highlights across the perfect molding of her face. As always, there was a deep admiration in him for this girl. He wondered now whether or not she held the power to persuade Kittering where he himself had failed. He decided to find out. "Maybe you could talk to Miles, Ann. This thing's got him licked, has taken the fight out of him. You're responsible for that."

"*I* am?" Ann wasn't as bewildered as she tried to appear. A chill settled through her as she saw the truth of Holden's words. She looked at her father, seeing that he sat with glance lowered, studying his knotty hands clasped on the table before him, a deep flush underlying the ruddy bronze of his face.

He muttered, deep-toned and querulously, "Fats, you're meddling in something that isn't your affair."

"No, Miles, he isn't," Ann said impulsively, facing a decision she had made and worded before she quite knew it. "It is my fault that you haven't stood up to Hugh, denied these things, even fought them. I'm sorry for that."

"We've thrashed this out before, Ann," Miles said, still regarding his hands.

"We thought we had. Now things are changed."

Kittering looked up. "How?"

"I believed in Hugh Allard as long as I could, for mother's sake. Today, before I came here, he lied to me. Not about one thing, but about everything! I . . . I've come to you, Miles, because I knew I'd find the truth."

A subtle change rode over Miles Kittering. His shoulders squared, the cloak of imperturbability he had been hiding behind dropped from his face like a mask removed. His eyes brightened with something akin to hope. He said gently, "You mean you've come to stay?"

Ann's eyes were suddenly brimming with tears. All at once she came up off the bench and went around the table to him, taking his

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head in her hands and pressing it to her breast. "Miles I . . . I've been a fool not to see it! I've been wrong! As terribly wrong as mother was. She knew it, too late. I won't make the mistake she did."

Fats was embarrassed and too full of a deep thankfulness to want to witness what followed. He left the room quietly, not wanting to look at the girl and her father, reunited now. It cut into a man to see the nakedness of emotion that lay in Kittering's eyes, the humbleness of the man, the strength that even now made him fight to make sure this was no mistaken impulse that brought his daughter back to him.

FATS knew a little of Kittering's past, enough for him to know what a great moment this was in Kittering's life. Ann's mother, Kittering's wife, had left Kittering years ago and taken their only child with her. There had been a divorce; Holden knew that much, a divorce which Hugh Allard had paid for. Hugh had brought Ann's mother and Ann out here and lavished on them the bounties of his wealth. But money hadn't been able to wipe away the past for Ann's mother. Holden knew she'd regretted her choice before she died, six years ago. Kittering had appeared in Sands soon after her death, to claim his child. He had failed in that by a ruling of the courts. He'd done the next best thing, begun a new life close to his daughter. Not once in these six years had he again tried to get Ann back. It seemed he was satisfied with the occasional glimpses he had of her. But now, through no doing of his, Ann was coming back to him. This was what lay behind their meeting tonight.

As he sauntered out across the yard, Holden's thoughts were interrupted by a call from Johnny

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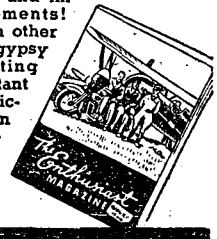

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Dawes: "Fats, better get down here and listen to this!"

Holden's glance went beyond the corral. It was still light enough for him to see Johnny standing there beside the stirrup of a pony. The rider in the saddle was Ed Beeson, who had last night helped work Circle A's herd into a box canyon in the hills. Ed had been left there to guard the herd through the day. It was strange that he should be here now.

"What is it, Ed?" Holden asked quickly as he strode up to them.

"I thought you ought to know about it, Fats. There was some powder burned up there in the hills today. I started down here when I heard it, thinkin' I might be needed. Then, just now as I come down off the hill, I could see a blaze over toward Circle A."

"A blaze?"

Beeson nodded: "A hell of a big one! Something's goin' on over there."

Holden didn't wait to hear more. He said, "Get some horses saddled!" and started at a run for the cabin, calling, "Miles!"

Kittering and Ann were standing outside the door. Holden saw that Kittering's arm was about the girl's shoulders, and sight of that sent a renewed surge of thankfulness through him.

"Miles," he said, "Ed's just in to report a blaze at Circle A."

Kittering frowned. Fats thought of something that made him wheel and call, "Johnny, where's Mule?"

"Gone all day," they heard Dawes call back. "Rode out this mornin', early."

Fats' look settled on Kittering and his mouth was twisted to a wry smile. "There's something else, Miles. We'll talk about it later. What's important now is that Jim Allard was to show up here before dark. He isn't here yet, which may

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be why Ed heard those guns up there this afternoon. Think we ought to get over to Circle A and take a look for ourselves?"

Kittering nodded quickly. "Ann, you'll stay here."

"No!" Ann said. "I'm coming with you."

"Then get down there with Dawes while I gather up a gun or two." Kittering wheeled in through the cabin's doorway.

Fats didn't move off immediately. He looked at the girl, a slow smile spreading over his gaunt face. "This is a great day, Ann," he said. It was obvious that he referred to the change in Kittering.

"For me, yes," she said, low-voiced. Abruptly she went sober. She began haltingly, "Jim Allard. Is he—" and left her idea unworded.

"I wish I knew," Fats said with a worried sigh. "I shouldn't have let him go up there alone."

"What kind of a man is he, Fats?"

Holden was a long moment in answering that. When he did, his voice came evenly, low: "The kind to ride the river with."

CHAPTER XIV

FIRE AT CIRCLE A

EVENING'S light was fading into dusk as Hugh Allard and Trent Harms left Circle A's office, came out the patio gate and started through the cottonwoods toward the crew quarters. Beyond the mesa's far edge, the desert lay almost wholly obscured by a deepening purple blanket of shadow while above, in the still blue sky, the evening star was taking on its pin-point brilliance. From one of the high poplars along the lane came a mocking-bird's long night call. The sound served to deepen the stillness that shrouded the layout.

Harms found the absence of familiar sounds depressing; he was nervous after this talk in the office with Hugh, and now he showed it: "I don't know, Hugh. You sure it'll work?"

"Why won't it?" Allard snapped, the curtness of his tone indicating that he, too, was feeling a nerve strain.

Harms made no answer, knowing that when Hugh was in a mood like this the best thing to do was to sit tight and see how things worked out.

They passed through the deep gloom of the cottonwoods, crossed the yard beyond and approached the bunkhouse. A man stepped into the lighted doorway, and Allard called, "Send Evans out here, Daniels." In an undertone, he added to Harms, "Not here, Trent! I don't want any witnesses to this but you and me."

"Evans?" said Daniels. "He ain't here. Left ten or fifteen minutes ago. Said he had to get in to town for something."

Allard swore under his breath and his look went bleak. His lips drew out to a thin hard line as his glance came around to his foreman. "You were so damned sure he'd wait around!"

Harms shrugged and held his tongue. Allard gave a jerk of his head, said, "Come on then," disgustedly, and led the way across to the cook shanty and beyond it to the door of a root cellar set in the face of the hill slope behind. On the way, Harms breathed a slow sigh of relief. It was to have been his job to get rid of Mule—a simple task, the way Allard had planned it. He was to have shot Mule. Now Mule was gone and Harms couldn't help feeling relieved.

Pausing at the root-cellar door,

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Allard asked, "Everything set at the barn, or will you muff that too?"

Harms smiled thinly. "Just like you said." He took a lantern down from a peg by the door and lit it. That smile clung to his face, for he was taking a grim satisfaction in what was coming now, a great deal more satisfaction than he would have had in cold-bloodedly shooting Mule Evans.

He unlocked the heavy padlock and kicked the door open. As he stepped through, the lantern's yellow wash of light fell on Jim Allard lying in a back corner, his head pillowed on a slanting heap of sprouting potatoes. Jim's arms and legs were tightly bound by many windings of a new Manila rope. His lean face was etched with pain from the numbness of arms and legs.

At sight of him Hugh drawled, "It'll be over soon, Allard. We'd planned to have Mule side you. But he got away."

"What'll be over soon?" Jim asked. For the last two hours he'd lain here trying to find one small hope of getting out of this. So far, nothing to bolster that hope had come to him. The pain in his arms and legs had ceased to matter; he was beyond feeling pain. Riding in here two hours ago they had found the layout deserted, Harms reporting that even Allard's daughter wasn't at the house. Jim had no illusions about what was to happen, and the mention of Mule now was pointed enough. Hugh Allard was too shrewd a man to let Mule Evans live, knowing what he did.

"You'll see," the rancher answered. He nodded to Harms. "Bring him along, Trent."

Harms' blunt face wore a broad grin as he bent down, took a hold on Jim's shirt front and heaved him to his feet. When Jim hunched his shoulders, trying to work the circulation back into his arms, Harms misread his move as an attempt to get free of the ropes. A sudden brutal look came to the foreman's eyes. He held Jim off at arm's length with his left hand and cocked his right. His fist slashed out and hit Jim a glancing blow on the mouth. Jim's head rocked back sickeningly and his whole body went limp in unconsciousness. He would have fallen but for Harms' tight hold.

A look of faint disdain crossed Allard's face as he looked on. "You wouldn't have done that if he'd had his hands free, Trent," he drawled, then saw the mirrored hatred on his foreman's face and added, more mildly, "Bring him along!"

HE led the way, Harms following with Jim's limp weight slung over his shoulder. Allard was a little worried over Mule getting away. He had played his hand strongly today and there were many doubtful quantities in what lay ahead.

The least of these was Trent Harms. But lately Harms had grown pretty sure of himself. His hitting Jim back there a moment ago was one evidence of it. A year ago, Trent wouldn't have dared take the initiative and do a thing like that without being told to first. He needed taking down a bit.

Hearing his foreman close behind him, Allard said, without turning or slowing his pace: "Trent, I've put an envelope in my box at the bank —just in case you get any ideas."

He heard Harms' swift intake of breath. Presently the foreman muttered in a ready voice, "Who said I was gettin' ideas?"

"No one. But I want you to know how things stand. You've been with me ten years now, ever since that

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Goldfield business. I'd hate to have you begin thinking you can demand favors. The law doesn't forget, Trent."

He was curious to see the expression on Harms' face but didn't give way to that curiosity. Any other man might have been afraid to walk in front of Harms at this moment, for the man had his guns and Allard's back offered a sure target. Allard ignored this, sure of himself. He had hired Trent ten years ago, across in Nevada, and helped the man by giving him work and a hiding place. Trent was wanted on a murder charge across in Goldfield, and Hugh knew the particulars well.

Harms had been a useful man for such things as they were doing now. Hugh had occasional need of such a man, one whose loyalty was unquestionable. But occasionally, when Harms grew too sure of himself, the rancher would find it necessary to remind him of his past.

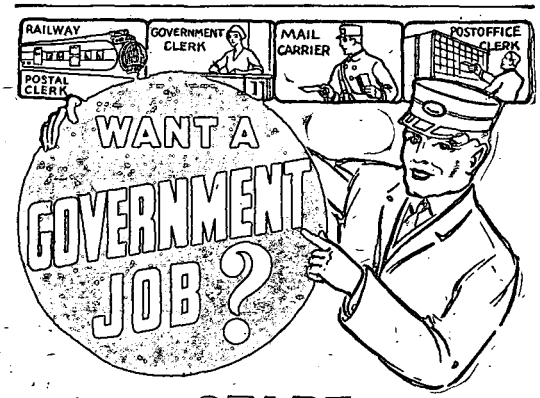
That reminder worked now, as it had before. Harms' sullen voice said complainingly, behind Allard: "Hell, boss, there was no call for that! I know how I stand."

"Just don't let it slip your mind, Trent."

They were approaching the big new barn with the rock foundation that footed the hill to the east. Harms was breathing hard under his load. Hugh went in through the big center door that stood wide open, Harms following closely. Harms set the lantern down and rolled Jim's weight from his shoulders, not gently. Allard sniffed the air. Mixed with the sweet smell of hay and the ammonia tang of the stables was another, more pungent odor, that of coal oil.

The rancher was satisfied. He nodded to Trent. "Go ahead."

Harms took the lantern and went over to climb a ladder that led to the loft. Allard, looking down into



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the darkness at his feet where Jim lay, heard the other moving about above. Presently, looking through the loft opening, he saw a wavering light reflected from the under side of the high roof, a light stronger than the lantern's.

Then Harms was back again, drawling, "She's caught."

The lantern's light touched Hugh Allard's face with severe sharp-planed shadows as he glanced critically down at Jim a last time. He thought of something and said, "Better take the rope off, Trent. We don't want anything like that to turn up when he's found."

Harms stooped and worked at the knots along Jim's back. From overhead a slow-mounting roar of sound was filling the roof's high dome. The light up there was stronger now. Presently, the foreman stood erect. "All right?" he queried and Allard, inspecting the rawhide thongs that bound Jim's wrists and ankles, nodded briefly.

"Close the door, Trent," he said, and stood outside while Harms rolled the double doors tight shut at the head of the runway. "How about the others?" he asked, when the foreman had finished. "Better peg 'em." Harms made a circuit of the barn, pegging tight the hasps on doors at each end of the stable side.

They stood a hundred feet out from the building's squat shadow, watching the rosy flicker of light coming from the cracks at the edges of the big hay door in the loft.

"Good enough," Hugh said finally, turning to the bunkhouse with a grim smile twisting his lips. "I don't think Jim Allard will cause me any more trouble!"

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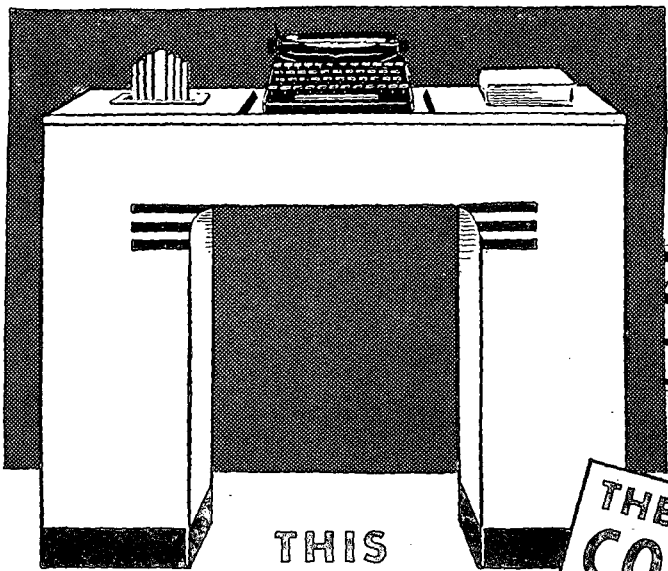

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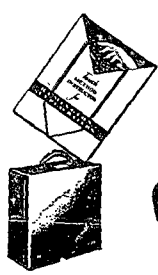

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